ERIK HENRY VICK

CLAW & WARDER

EPISODE 7: A TAIL OF TWO CITIES

A Tail of Two Cities

CLAW & WARDER

Episode 7

ERIK HENRY VICK

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For Bob and Lisa, with love.

I hope you enjoy *A Tail of Two Cities*. If so, please consider joining my Readers Group—details can be found at the end of the last chapter.

Chapter 1

The Body

In the magical justice system, magically based offenses are considered bad form.

In the Locus of New York, the dedicated teams of supernatural detectives who investigate these breaches of Canon and Covenants are members of an elite squad known as the Supernatural Inquisitors Squad.

These are their stories.

I

Bill Hartman whistled while he walked, enjoying the relative quiet of his early morning stroll through Manhattan. He'd purchased his apartment on West 46th Street because it was only a few blocks to his shop, and when the city closed 46th Street to public automobile traffic, it only made it that much better. Eight blocks at six in the morning were like heaven in the summer months.

Not so much in winter, but a guy can't have everything.

He turned the corner onto 5th Avenue and froze, mouth hanging open. Shattered glass covered the sidewalk outside the 47th Street Diamond Exchange. All the windows of Sephora, the AT&T store, and Lululemon had exploded into the street.

Bill rushed through the drifts of glass, heedless of the danger a fall into the mass of sharp glass presented, then stepped through the glass-less door frames and into the lobby

of his building. One of the elevator's doors stood open, the car wrenched off-kilter in the shaft. The other elevator dinged, and a thin man wearing a black suit stepped out. He paused a moment, no doubt stunned by the carnage on the street, then withdrew his glasses and slid them on. After a momentary glance at Bill, he said, "What in the hell happened?"

"No idea," said Bill. "It was like this when I came around the corner."

"That's New York for you," said the man with a shrug. He stepped by Bill, then out into the sea of broken glass.

"Yeah," murmured Bill as he stepped into the elevator. He rode up to the fourteenth floor, his mind awhirl with speculation about what kind of emergency could cause all that damage.

When the elevator doors opened, he completely forgot about the glass-strewn street below, fumbled his cell phone out of his pocket with shaking hands, and phoned the police.

2

Leery put the Crown Victoria in park and opened his door, his gaze never leaving the sparkling blooms of glass in front of the Diamond Exchange. Dru opened her door and stood, glanced at all the glass, then turned to Leery. "You're not going to leave it in the middle of the road, are you?"

"My usual parking space is otherwise occupied," he said, jerking his chin at the sidewalk in front of Lululemon. "Lulu lemon has the best spot, even if their name is false advertising. Did you know they don't sell lemonade? Or anything made of lemons?" He walked to the front of the car.

Dru pursed her lips, fighting to hide a grin. "It's a clothing store." She closed her door and went to stand next to him.

"Nah. Who'd name a clothing store after lemons?"

"Chip Wilson. They make yoga pants."

"Yogurt pants?"

Dru sighed. "Now I know you're just pulling my leg."

Leery took a long, slow look at her legs. "I could be convinced."

"Come on, bozo," said Dru as she began to pick her way through all the shattered glass.

"Are you nuts? You'll ruin those million-dollar boots!" He came up next to her. "Here, let me carry you, Dru-baby."

"You do remember I threatened to make you walk with a limp if you called me that, right?"

"What? Oh, sure. But I know you didn't mean it." He bent and picked her up as though she weighed nothing at all. "And if you *did* mean it, just think about who would be carrying you through all these glass posies if I couldn't."

Dru's answer was a lopsided grin. "I wonder what happened here."

"Looks like some windows broke."

"Oh, I'd have never guessed."

"Sure you would've. You're a detective, after all." He reached the lobby and set her on her feet.

"Thanks," she said with a smile. "My knight in shining armor."

Leery tipped her a wink and walked over to the red-haired corporal leaning against the

wall and keeping the scene log. "Hey there, Red," he said. "Dru, meet Red."

"Oriscoe," said the corporal, straightening. She glanced at Dru and stuck out her hand. "Sami Valentine."

"Dru Nogan." They shook hands, and Dru smiled.

"Did you get that mess in the Locus of Los Angeles straightened out, then?" asked Leery.

"Sort of," said Valentine with a shrug. "I'm glad to be back in a big city, though. Those small towns..."

"Oh, yeah," said Oriscoe. "Small towns will absolutely kill you once you're used to the pace of a big city."

"Fourteen," said Red, flicking the end of her pen at the elevator doors. "Good to meet you, Dru. You'll want to watch those boots."

"You, too, and thanks," said Dru as Valentine resumed her leaning against the marble-clad wall.

"Oh, hey," said Leery with a grin. "It was good to see you, too, Red." Leery glanced at the collapsed elevator. "That does a lot for my confidence."

"Come on, you big baby," said Dru, pulling him into the other elevator and pressing the fourteenth-floor button.

The doors opened on what looked like the remains of a battlefield. Flames had blackened the walls, carpets, and furnishings and had discolored the floor-to-ceiling glass walls. CSI technicians sifted through the wreckage, while two MEs stood over two white-bagged corpses. A civilian stood talking to two uniformed officers as far from the bodies as he could get.

Leery led Dru over to the witness. "We'll take it from here," he said to the uniformed cops. Turning to the man, he said, "I'm Leery Oriscoe, and this is my partner, Dru Nogan. We're homicide detectives. What happened here?"

The man turned his shell-shocked gaze on Leery and shrugged. "It was like this when I arrived."

"Sure, sure. What I meant was, tell us all about it. Let's start with your name."

"Oh." The man's gaze flicked to the body bags, then to the uniformed officers. "Bill Hartman. I've already been through it with them."

"Ain't bureaucracy grand?" asked Leery, flashing a winning smile. "Ever play telephone when you were a kid? We like to hear the details direct. You know, avoid misunderstandings and all that."

"Oh. Sure." Again, the man's eyes flicked to the body bags, then the cops, and this time, the elevator. "Do we..." He gulped a breath and gave a firm nod. "I came in early, like usual—I'm a lithomancer and an enchanter, and I like to practice my art in private. Anyway, the first thing I noticed was all the glass in the street. Then, the wrecked elevator, but the other one worked, so I..."

"So you came on up," said Dru, softly.

"Right. When the doors opened and I saw all the soot, I called for help. I..." His gaze flicked to the body bags once more. "I didn't know about the bodies then."

"Did you see anyone else?" asked Leery.

"I..." His gaze snapped to Leery's, and his eyes seemed to light up. "Yes! There was a man...he came out of the elevator when I was in the lobby. He asked me what happened."

Leery glanced at Dru. "What did this man look like, Mr. Hartman?"

"Oh...I... I didn't pay him much mind." He gave a helpless little shrug. "He wore black, I think."

"What color was his hair?" asked Dru in a serene voice. "His eyes?"

"I..." Hartman gave another helpless shrug. "He put on glasses."

Leery jotted the detail down in his notes. "Same height as you? Taller? Shorter?"

"A little taller, maybe."

Leery looked him up and down. "And you're what, five foot ten?"

"Eleven," Bill said. "Five foot eleven."

"Good. See there? You saw more than you think."

Bill grunted, and his gaze danced to the body bags again. "I think..."

"Yes?" asked Dru.

"David Berman and his son, Ari, I think." He looked at her with a haunted expression. "From their sizes and shapes."

"They own the place?" asked Leery.

"My partners," said Bill. "Usually, I beat them in. I like the quiet in the morning."

"You are a jeweler, right? You have a lot of precious gems here?"

Bill jerked his head toward a blackened mass of metal with a heavy door standing open. "We did."

"I see," said Leery. "Not to be indelicate, Mr. Hartman, but would the Bermans consider doing a deal or two off the books?"

Hartman gazed at him, a spark in his eyes. "What are you saying?"

Leery hitched his shoulders. "Early morning—"

"Or late-night," put in Dru.

"—meeting with persons unknown leads to a robbery and murder. We've got to consider it a deal gone bad."

"At least to rule it out," said Dru.

"And to do that, we need to know if your partners conducted business off the books regularly. We're not the IRS, so we don't care if they did, except it opens certain doors for our investigation."

Hartman nodded, then blew out his cheeks. "Up until this morning, I'd have said no in an instant, but..."

"Right," said Leery. "Then you have no idea who they might have had a meeting with?"

Hartman shook his head. "I can't imagine what would have brought them here after hours. David liked to follow the rules."

"I see."

"Ari, though..."

"Yes?" asked Dru. "Ari what?"

"He was more interested in...expediting things, shall we say? More interested in loopholes in the letter of the law than following the spirit of it."

"I see," said Leery. "Ari might have been more tempted by a shadowy deal than you and David?"

Hartman nodded. "That's fair. But I don't think he would have gone so far as to buy blood diamonds, or, say, help a snack dealer launder money. A sale with no receipt and no taxes paid? Sure. Maybe buying some gemstones without proper paperwork. Perhaps David got wind of it and came down to put a stop to it."

"Okay," said Leery. "That gives us something to work on. Is there a Mrs. Berman?"

Bill nodded. "There was. She passed three years ago."

"Ah. What about Ari? Did he have a wife? A girlfriend?"

"Yes—at least, the last time I spoke to him of such things. Her name was..." Hartman rolled his gaze to the ceiling and lifted a hand to tap two fingers on his lips. "Laura something," he murmured. "Laura... Laura Hansen? Hapson?" He shook his head. "I have it on my computer. They lived together."

"Do you have the address?"

Nodding, Hartman took a step toward a blackened lump of twisted plastic, then stopped. "Uh. Yes. I have an offsite backup. It's at home, actually. I can send you the address as soon as I can leave."

Leery nodded, turning his attention to the office. "I assume you have an inventory of that safe?"

"Of course," said Hartman.

"Anything else strike you? Anything look missing besides the contents of the safe?"

Bill glanced around, his shoulders slumped, then sighed. "I can't tell."

"Well, maybe after you've had a chance to go through things a bit. We'll start with that address and the safe's inventory." Leery fished out a dog-eared business card and handed it

over. "Give us a call if you discover something missing. In the meantime, I'd like to set you up with one of our sketch artists. They're pretty good at helping people remember details. I'll send the best we've got—a guy by the name of Johnny Smith."

Bill shrugged.

3

After getting his contact information, Leery sent Bill Hartman on his way, then arranged for Johnny to work his magic. With that done, he walked over to the bearded ME working the scene and nodded. "Hey there, Joe. What do you know?"

"Cute. Real cute." He glanced at Dru and stuck out his hand. "Joseph Curwen, at your service."

"Dru Nogan," she said, giving his hand a shake.

"Charmed," he said.

"Yeah, she does that to people. What went on here, Joe? And where the hell is Hendrix?"

Curwen grimaced and glared down at the body bag at his feet. "Some form of elemental magic," he murmured. "And something else. This man was tortured before the fire ended his suffering." He lifted his gaze to Leery's face. "As for Liz, even MEs get a vacation, Oriscoe."

"Sure, sure. How can you tell all that?" asked Leery.

Curwen shrugged. "I resurrected him briefly and asked him. He felt a crushing weight from all sides at once. The force was enough to break his bones."

"Necromancer?" asked Dru, arching an eyebrow. "You look..."

"I have that kind of face," said Curwen. "Many people think I resemble someone or other."

Dru only squinted at him.

"And, yes, I practice necromancy." He lifted his chin. "It's a helpful discipline in my line of work."

"I'll bet," said Leery. "Did... Which one is this? David or Ari?"

"David," whispered the corpse.

"Don't mind him," said Joseph. "The spirit sometimes lingers."

"Right," said Leery, taking a step back. "So, anyway, did David say who attacked them?"

Joe shook his head. "He didn't know the man."

"Then maybe you can ply your trade on his son, Ari."

"I tried," said Curwen. "He doesn't wish to be disturbed. I take it he's upset over being tortured and murdered. 'Betrayed,' he said." The man shrugged and reseated his glasses on his nose. "His father said Ari was held in a static field of some kind, that he was forced to watch as the assailant killed David."

"That's a lot of magic flying around."

Joseph nodded soberly. "Add to it the blast that blew out the glass and broke the elevator shaft. David said the mysterious visitor yelled in frustration as Ari died, stomping his foot and glaring around like he was looking for something to break, and the fires started all over the floor. After that, the man sighed, and there was a horrendous crash and all the air left the building for a few moments. It was enough to extinguish the fire."

"I wondered why nothing was wet."

"And now you know the answer," said Curwen.

"Why was David here?" asked Dru.

"My son, the putz," wheezed the body.

"Sounds like the man has something to say," said Leery.

"He told me everything you'll need to know," said Joseph. "His son set up a meeting with a man named Conflict."

"*Doctor* Conflict," said the corpse, and Curwen frowned down at the body bag.

"Dr. Conflict, eh?" Leery shrugged and wrote it down. "Somehow, I don't think his number's in the phone book. Did you get a description?"

Curwen frowned at him and treated him to a brisk nod. "Tall, glasses, dark hair, swarthy complexion, wearing a black suit."

"Ah," said Leery. "The witness mentioned a man in a black suit and glasses."

"What are the chances of finding someone unrelated to the crime coming out of the building at oh-dark-thirty?" asked Dru.

"Not good," said the body at their feet.

"Anything else you can tell us, Joe?"

"The magic used is ancient. And strange."

"Strange how? And how old is ancient?"

Joe looked at him askance. "If pressed, I'd say the magic is outside time as we know it.

And strange as in no record of it in the field of Magical Examination."

"Great," said Leery. "So, we're looking for a man in black who somehow transcends time and uses strong magic that no one's ever heard of." He flipped his notepad closed. "I should have listened to my mother and joined one of the trades. Plumbing, maybe." He glanced at Dru. "Do you think your mother might—"

"We'll need something coated in residue of the magic," she said to Joe. "Preferably, not a body."

Joseph swept his hand out in a wide circle. "Anything charred will do."

4

Leery followed Dru through the portal in her apartment and into Gehenna, carrying what had once been a piece of carved mahogany—a paperweight from one of the desks at the crime scene.

"Mommy!" called Dru as she opened the door to the hall.

"Drusilla!" The thunderous shout echoed through the giant onyx palace, setting the whole place ringing. "We're in my dayroom!"

"I know! I've got Leery with me, so put on some clothes."

Agrat bat Mahlat didn't answer, except for the throaty chuckle that echoed through the halls. Dru and Leery walked through the halls, moving at a slow enough pace to give Agrat time to dress, and eventually paused outside the door to her dayroom.

Three beautiful succubi—all dressed, more's the pity—stood around Agrat's worktable, and Dru squealed with happiness as she ran toward them. "Aunt Lily! Auntie Naamah!" She wrapped each of them in a big hug that culminated with a kiss on each cheek, then stepped back, grinning.

"Hello, Dizzy," said Lilith, though her speculative gaze never left Leery's face.

"It's Dru, now, Lily," murmured Agrat. "She's all grown up."

"Of course she is, dearest," said Lilith.

"Well? Don't leave us in suspense, little Diz. Introduce us to this marvelous example of"—she lifted her nose and sniffed—"wolf."

"Oh, right. Lily, Naamah, meet my partner, Leery Oriscoe." She turned toward Leery and a slow smile spread across her face. "Leery, dear, close your mouth. You'll draw flies. Anyway, meet my aunts: Lilith, who was once named Lilitu, Daughter of the Sky, Sister to Night and Wind and Storm, Desolator of Edom, the Hand of Inanna, Irritant of Asherah, the Spirit in the Tree, the Bane of Betrayers, She of the Great and Terrible Name, Goddess of Seduction and Desolation and Disease and Night. Also known as Our Lady Chaos in some circles." She dimpled at Lily over her shoulder. "And meet Naamah, Mother of Divination, Giver of the Plagues, Corrupter of Angels, Wife to Solomon, Seducer of Nephilim, Breaker of Samael, the Great Seducer of Mankind, She of the Great and Terrible Name, Goddess of the Otherworlds and the Disincarnate."

"Charmed," squeaked Leery, swallowing hard.

"Oh, look, Lily," said Naamah with a smile. "He's verklempt."

"And we got dressed! Imagine what would have happened had we stayed *au natural*." The two demons laughed, and Leery's blush deepened. "But alas, I see my sister's mark." Lily glanced at Agrat and lifted one eyebrow.

"It's not for me," she said and inclined her head toward Dru. "But they are partners, and so, there are boundaries, evidently."

Lily turned a cross expression on Dru. "I thought we taught you better than that, Dizzy!"

"Ladies, please," said Leery. "No need to argue. Dru's my partner, and there are lines *I* don't cross."

Naamah quirked an eyebrow at him. "I could have you dancing over that line in a heartbeat, wolf."

"Sure," he said, swallowing hard, "but that's not *me* acting, then, is it?"

Naamah sniffed and turned toward Dru. "Why haven't you bedded him, Niece, at the very least?"

Dru stood, head down, fiddling with her fingernails.

"Sisters," said Agrat. "Dru is grown. She makes her own decisions, and I'll not have her

teased this way. She comes home so rarely as it is."

Lilith chuckled and came to stand next to Dru. She lay one hand on her shoulder, then rested her chin on the back of her hand. "Forgive your jejune old aunties, Dru. We get so bored these days. And we were only teasing you."

"Yes," said Dru in a small voice.

"What brings you, dearest?" asked Agrat. While she spoke, she held up one hand toward Leery and beckoned him over. He stepped around the table and walked to her side, where he sighed and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. She flashed a quick smile at him.

"We ran into something strange on a case," Dru said. "Leery?"

He cleared his throat and held out the blackened chunk of wood he'd taken from one of the desks back at the Diamond Exchange. "We found this in the remains of a huge fire." He didn't look toward Lilith or Naamah, even when they tittered and whispered.

Agrat took the charred piece of wood and turned it over in her hands. She glanced at Leery, then turned toward Dru and barked a

few phrases in that spidery language Dru sometimes used for her really potent spells.

Dru's gaze danced to his, and she shook her head. "We can't walk away from it, Mommy. It's our job to stop the perpetrator."

Agrat drew a deep breath and let it out all at once, puffing out her cheeks. "Your father will be displeased."

"I know, but—"

Lilith arched an eyebrow and spoke in the spidery language, rattling off a long paragraph.

"Do you think I won't tell him what you're saying?" Dru demanded, stomping her foot. "You're being rude. All of you!"

Lilith glanced at Agrat, then lifted her palms toward Dru. She went on in that creepy tongue, and as she did, Dru began to translate.

"She says: 'It's not rude to speak in this tongue. If he's to be your partner, he should learn it. If he's to be your lover, as you so both plainly want, it's the least of the tasks he must perform before I'll entrust you to him.'"

"Uh..." murmured Leery. Agrat put her hand on his arm.

"Lilith, dear sister, do you not remember how my daughter is when she's decided something is 'the right thing' to do? You can't argue with her. And Leery is her partner, Sisters. You can't tell her one thing and expect her to hold it back."

"That's right," said Dru, folding her arms across her chest. "So, you might as well drop the *Lingua Tenebris Lacuna*." She glared at her aunts until they shrugged.

"Fine, little Diz," said Naamah. "If you insist."

"As I was saying," said Naamah. "And as Agrat would no doubt tell you, if she thought you might be smart for once and listen, the caster of this magic is dangerous in the extreme."

"You can tell all that by a hunk of charred wood?" asked Leery.

"Yes, of course," said Naamah. "We gave witchcraft to your kind, after all."

"But this isn't anything so mundane as witchcraft," said Lilith. "This is the personal magic of an ancient soul."

"A dragon," said Dru in a flat voice.

"A dra..." Leery shook his head as though to clear away a dizzy feeling. "Wait a minute. How

could a dragon fit inside the place? It was on the fourteenth floor, and the blast blew *outward*."

Naamah grinned and shrugged with one shoulder—and even that, she managed to make into a flirtatious act. "Dragons are shifters, wolf. Doesn't the Pack teach you newbies *anything*?"

"I must have missed that day," muttered Leery. "Why would a dragon want any other form?"

"The man who came out of the elevator," said Dru, tapping the glossy nail of her index finger against her lips. "The man in the black suit that spoke to Hartman."

Lily smiled at Dru. "To pass as humans, wolf," she said.

"Right," said Leery. "Let's hope Smith can pull more details out of his head."

"Leave this with us," said Agrat, holding up the scrap of charred wood. "Even this is dangerous for you to hold on to."

5

Dru didn't speak as they retraced their steps through Agrat's palace, but as they stepped back into her apartment, she sighed. "Family," she said.

"Don't worry about it," said Leery. "There's a reason I've never introduced you to my Uncle Gus." He wrinkled his nose. "And it's the smell."

She tilted her head and peeked at him from the corner of her eye. "Why haven't you introduced me to your family?"

"Uh..." Leery glanced around as though looking for a way to escape. "They're all mundanes." He shrugged. "I don't think a single one of them knows the slightest thing about dragons or their magic." He chuckled, but Dru didn't follow suit.

"You said your daughter is interested in the Dead Set."

"Well...sure. She was, anyway, before all the press about our little visit to LaSalle's place. Last time I called, she hung up on me, saying I ruined her only dream."

"See? I could talk to her. I could introduce her around...to the *right* sort of vampires."

Leery's lips twitched, and he dropped his gaze to the floor. "Maybe. We should give Johnny a call." He turned and walked out of the room, and after a moment, Dru followed.

"Why don't you give him a buzz," she muttered as she caught up with him in the kitchen. She breezed past him and out the front door of her apartment. By the time he caught up with her, she stood in the elevator, her finger on the button keeping the doors open.

"Right," he said. "Hey, what language was that? I think I've heard you use it before."

"The *Lingua Tenebris Lacuna*. The dark tongue."

"Ah," he said. "And who speaks it?"

"People who aren't good enough to meet your daughter, evidently." She let the doors slide shut, and the elevator began its descent.

Leery glanced at her and cleared his throat. "Yeah. About that—"

"No, you don't have to say anything. I get it."

"No, I don't think you do. It's—"

"I said you didn't have to explain." The doors opened, and Dru swept out of the elevator without waiting for his reply.

"Ho, boy," he said under his breath. "Good going, Oriscoe." He went after her but didn't manage to catch up until he slid into the driver's seat.

Dru sat staring straight ahead. "You should call before you get out into traffic."

"Listen, Dru—"

"Or would you rather I call Johnny Smith?" She dropped her gaze and began digging in her purse for her phone.

"It's not that you're not good enough, okay?" Leery said.

"If I lost my damn phone again..." Dru muttered.

"I mean, if anything, you're too good to meet her. But listen, it's just that—"

"No explanation necessary. I'm fine." She brought her phone out of her bag and pointed forward with her other hand. "Get this crate moving, Oriscoe."

"I want to—"

"Moving," she repeated, not looking at him the entire time. She swept her lock screen

away and thumped her finger on Johnny Smith's contact.

Leery grimaced and turned the key in the ignition. "Ho, boy," he muttered.

Chapter 2

The Investigation

I

As soon as the elevator doors at the Two-Seven opened, Dru strode away, turning left instead of walking into the squad room. Leery stepped out and watched her go for a moment, shoulders slumped, hands stuffed in his pockets.

"What'd you do?" asked Van Helsing's disembodied voice.

"What? Oh, hey, Lieu."

"What'd you do?" she repeated, materializing next to him. "Steal her pens again?"

"I only wish it was something like that. She's 'fine.'"

Van Helsing cocked her head to the side and looked up at him. "You've got a way with women, don't you?"

"Lieu, you have no idea."

"Well, you'd better figure out how to fix it. I don't want your...uh...life interfering with the work."

Leery nodded. "Yeah. You're right, Lieu. The work is what's most important." His tone was flat, but Van Helsing hit him with a penetrating stare.

"Is it time for me to find you another partner?"

"No, Lieu. We're fine. Just a bump in the road."

"Right," said Epatha as she slowly faded from view. "Fix it, Oriscoe."

"Women should come with a manual," Leery muttered.

"Nah. Then men would know how to deal with us," Epatha whispered in his ear.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," said Leery, half a smile on his lips. He glanced around. "Lieu?" He stood there a moment longer, then shrugged and went to grab some coffee.

When he made it into the squad room, he set a mug of coffee on Dru's desk and sipped from his own. "Seven sugars," he said with a grin. She nodded without returning his grin, and Leery sat in his chair. "I cleaned the pot and everything. I even muttered some words in Latin over the pot, so I guess it's made with holy water."

"Doesn't work that way," murmured Dru, still not looking up.

Leery sighed. "Did Johnny get something from Bill Hartman?"

"Yes."

"Okay... Did the illustrious Mr. Smith have anything that might help?"

"Yes. Some details about the description."

"Um, okay. What are you working on now?"

She shot a narrow-eyed glance at him and opened her mouth, but before she could deliver whatever snappy comment she had in mind, Van Helsing appeared.

"Get over to the Maleficium Cryptogenia Unit," she said. "It seems like this morning's performance wasn't a one-off, except for the bodies."

"Right," said Leery.

Van Helsing glanced at him, then at Dru as the Warder ducked to fish her bag out of the bottom drawer of her desk. "Fix it, dammit," mouthed Epatha.

Leery sighed and nodded, and Van Helsing disappeared again. "Dru, you want to drive?"

"Why?" she asked.

"My neck's really bothering me."

"You seemed fine before," she said.

"Yeah, uh...it just flared up."

"Right." She hooked her keys out of her purse and turned toward the elevator. "Come on, then."

They walked in silence, Leery thinking furiously, Dru seeming unaware of his existence. They got in the car, and Dru started it and pulled into traffic, pointing the car south toward 1PP.

"Hey, you know before when you asked about meeting my family and I said, 'Maybe?'"

She glanced at him, lips a tight white line. "We don't have to discuss it."

"Yeah, I think we do."

"No, we don't. I'm totally fine."

"Look, Dru, I didn't mean 'Maybe you can meet her,' all I meant was 'Maybe you could introduce her to vampires.' It's not exactly her mother and my dreams for her, you know. Joining the undead."

Some of the tension left Dru's shoulders for a moment, then came right back. "What's wrong with the undead?" she snapped.

"Nothing, Dru. Nothing, except you have to die to join up. At least for mundanes."

The tension drained away again, and Dru shot him a sideways glance.

"Yeah, it's silly, I know, because she'd come right back the next day, but..."

"But you don't want to see your daughter die." Her voice a curious mixture of understanding and the dregs of her pique.

"Right."

"And I can meet her?"

"Dru, you can meet anyone you want. I meant it when I said you're almost too good for my family."

She glanced at him but turned back to the road quickly. "But they're mundane."

"Yes, and I'll have to tell some of them that I'm Pack now, but that's something I should have done a while ago."

"Not your daughters, right?"

"No, we told them each when they turned eighteen."

Dru lifted her chin and let it drop. "I see. What about Uncle Gus?"

"Hey, if you want to experience the funk, the funk you shall smell." Leery turned in his seat and looked at her. "You're kind of cute when you're pissed off."

"Am I?" she asked with a slow smile.

"Yeah, your butt gets this wiggle to it when you stomp off in a yank."

She glanced at him and stuck out her tongue, and as easy as that, it was over. "If you think I'm pulling over so you can drive, you're nuts."

"Gonna tell me what Johnny Smith had to say?"

"Not a whole lot we don't already know. To Hartman he was only a man, but there were some things Smith picked up: Hartman's racing pulse when he reviewed the memory."

"Prey response."

"Right. And the scent of brimstone."

"Hey, wouldn't that be more up your family's alley?"

"I thought odors belonged to Uncle Gus?"

Leery grinned. "Got me there."

"Hah! I've got you anywhere I want you, wolfman."

"Ain't it the truth?" Leery said with a sigh.

2

The Maleficium Cryptogenia Unit was as unlike the Supernatural Inquisitors squad room as it could be. Where the Two-Seven was housed in an ancient building and had last been remodeled sometime in the 1970s, the MCU was in the modern building at 1 Police Plaza, lined with concrete bricks, and judging by the smell of paint and disinfectant, it might have been remodeled that very morning while Dru and Leery were in Gehenna.

They walked into the library-like squad room full of detectives working in near silence, and Leery almost cringed. A pretty woman stood up and walked toward them, an uncertain smile on her face.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Yeah, uh..." said Leery.

"Leery Oriscoe and Dru Nogan," said Dru, extending her hand.

"Kathandra Earbes," said the woman. "Oh! You're from the Twenty-seventh?"

"That's us," said Leery.

"Great! We're so happy to have you come by," said Earbes.

"Uh, we?" asked Leery, looking around.

"Oh." Earbes chuckled. "My partner is waiting for us in the conference room. We thought you might be more comfortable there."

Leery arched an eyebrow. "Wow, you 1PP types live a different life from us poor schlubs in the precincts. A conference room?"

"It's this way," said Earbes, smiling the whole time.

They followed her out of the squad room and down the hall. "Things here at 1PP follow a certain aesthetic," she said over her shoulder. "You know, everything in its place, and a place for everything."

"I know a chief who thinks that way," said Leery, "but it isn't Magnussen."

"He keeps to himself, mostly. Sure, we're in his chain of command, but..." She shrugged. "Well, others take a more active day-to-day role in management."

"Smith," muttered Leery.

"Here we are," said Earbes, waving her hand toward a closed door like a game show supermodel. "My partner is inside. After you."

With a grunt, Leery held the door for Dru, then followed her inside. A large man sat hunched over the conference table. Books, newspapers, magazines, a laptop, and a peculiar leather-bound notebook covered the table. "Gonofrio," the big man said without looking up.

"I'm Oriscoe," said Leery.

"Heard of you," said Gonofrio, his nose still buried in the book he was reading.

"Likewise. I heard you do good work."

Gonofrio waved his free hand.

"And this is my partner, Dru Nogan."

Gonofrio lifted his gaze, his face a blank, and he looked her over for a second before returning to his book. "Never met a succubus in the flesh before. Princess neither," he said in an almost-mumble.

"Charmed."

"Vinny...manners," said Earbes, closing the door behind her. "You can read later."

Gonofrio shot her a narrow-eyed glare, then shoved the book away. He stretched in much the same way as an over-tired four-year-old, then scrubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Didn't sleep much," he murmured. "Too much to do."

"Hopefully, we can help you with that," said Leery.

Gonofrio swept a gaze his way. "Doubtful," he said.

"Come on, Vinny," said Earbes softly. To Leery, she said, "Don't mind him. He gets like this when he's stuck."

"I'm not stuck!" protested Gonofrio. "I'm *thinking*. There's a difference, you know."

"Yeah, so..." said Leery. "Our lieutenant said we're working on a case that might be related to one of yours."

"Which?" grunted Gonofrio with a shrug.

"The diamond exchange robbery this morning."

Gonofrio shrugged. "I heard you were homicide, Oriscoe."

"They found two bodies in the ashes," said Dru.

Vinny glanced at her, then started digging through the papers on the table. "That's new." He pulled out a stack of loose-leaf paper and shoved it across the table at Leery. "My notes on three other robberies with similar destruction to the premises. No murders, though."

Leery slid the paper toward Dru. "We figure a dragon is behind ours."

"Yeah," said Gonofrio. "Obviously."

Leery arched his eyebrows.

Vinny shoved his hand out toward the papers Dru was leafing through. "The fire. The jewels. The-the-the witnesses."

"We had Johnny Smith talk to ours. You?"

Gonofrio grimaced. "Psychics." The single word spoke volumes about his feeling toward the profession.

"You have a description?" asked Leery, looking around at the stuff covering the table.

"Yes," said Gonofrio. "Fat lot of good it will do. He's a *dragon.*"

"Yeah," said Leery. "Shapeshifter, then."

"Right, right!" said Vinny, almost bouncing his chair. "He can look like you or me or Earbes. Not her, though," he said as his gaze twitched past Dru. "Just humans."

Dru looked up. "You're being disingenuous, Gonofrio."

Vinny frowned and looked away.

"Something I should know?" Leery asked.

"Vinbert's one of the Nephilim," said Earbes.

"Oh, then *you're* the Claw?" asked Leery, with an assessing glance at her. "Kind of small for the role, aren't you?"

"Oh, I can be fierce when I need to be," she said. "I'm a pooka."

"I've never met one of your kind before," said Dru.

"Yes, yes!" snapped Gonofrio. "She's a pooka. How interesting!" His tone made it clear he thought anything but.

"Vinny, have you tried coffee?" asked Leery. "I think I passed a machine back there, and I could sure use a cup. Come show me how to use the thing?"

"Good idea," said Vinny, pushing away from the table. "I'm too tired to think straight."

"Right, right," said Leery. "Coffee will fix you right up." He led the large man out the door and clapped him on the shoulder.

As the door swung shut, Earbes sighed. "I wish he'd take better care of himself. He pushes too hard."

"He's a male," said Dru with a shrug. "Plus, there's that whole Nephilim thing."

Earbes smiled. "Listen, don't be offended. Vinny has almost no filter outside the

interrogation room, but he doesn't mean things the way they sound most of the time."

"I'll bear that in mind." Dru glanced down at the scribbled notes. "He sees things, though, doesn't he? Things other people miss."

"Oh, you bet," said Kathandra, staring at the door.

3

Gonofrio walked up to the elaborate coffee machine and began fiddling stainless steel levers back and forth. He pulled out the empty pot and handed it to Oriscoe. "Sink's back there," he said, hooking his thumb over his shoulder.

"Sure, I'll get the water," said Leery with a smile. He went and found the sink, which was vaguely in the same direction as Gonofrio had pointed and came back with the pot full to the rim. "Hey, I was at Puriel's house a few weeks ago. Ever been there?"

Gonofrio shook his head.

"Oh. Huge place in the Palisades. Nice view." Leery cleared his throat. "Awesome coffee. He said it was because of the holy water."

Vinbert cast an expressionless glance at him. "Nah."

"Yeah. That's what he said the secret was."

"Puriel wouldn't waste power on coffee." Gonofrio took the pot and poured its contents into a stainless-steel cylinder connected to the rest of the apparatus with bronze pipes.

"Oh. Well...would you?"

Gonofrio grinned sideways at him, then held his hands out toward the cylinder. "I *always* do." He chanted in Enochian for a moment, then nodded and flipped a few more levers.

"Jeesh," said Leery. "You'd think you were sending it to the moon for brewing. At our place, there's only one little black switch. Right for on, and left for off."

"The perks of 1PP," said Gonofrio. "What did your pet psychic find out?"

"Who, Smith? He's the department's pet, not mine."

Vinny shrugged.

"Dru spoke with him, but he didn't have a lot to add—mostly guesses about the man's

true nature based on the wit's biologic responses."

"Right. Humans might sense a dragon subconsciously, but they can't perceive a thing like that," said Gonofrio. He watched the coffee brew, hands clasped in front of him like a little boy watching a train set. When the coffee finished, he nudged Leery with his elbow. "Grab four mugs." He held his suit coat out from his body enough to hide the coffee pot and walked into the hall. With a glance around, Leery grabbed four mugs and followed.

As they reached the conference room, someone shouted behind them, "Gonofrio!"

Vinny chuckled and held his finger to his lips, then went through the door. Leery followed and passed him the mugs while Vinny poured the steaming black coffee into the cups and passed them around.

"We're in for a treat," said Leery. "Vinny blessed the water."

Earbes rolled her eyes. "It's still tap water."

"*Holy* tap water," corrected Vinny. "It tastes better."

"If you say so. Now, Dru and I have been chatting about the crimes. The question of why

this dragon has been robbing jewelry stores and gem cutters came up. Vinny, put your big brain in gear and figure that out."

"That's easy," said Gonofrio. "And obvious. The question is: why just New York?"

"Share with the class, Vinny," said Earbes.

Vinny grunted and huffed for a moment. "Easy. Obvious. He's a dragon. Maybe he lost his hoard. Eh-eh--even if he didn't, he loves gems, right? Look, the important—"

"How does a dragon *lose* his hoard?" asked Leery.

"Well, someone takes it. Another dragon. A leprechaun. Whoever. What we need to—"

"Then why not track down the thief and take it back?" asked Dru. "A dragon has powerful magic at his disposal."

"Yes," said Gonofrio. "And a blind spot where his treasure is concerned."

"I haven't been a wolf all that long," said Orsicoe, "but don't you have to kill a dragon to steal his treasure?"

Gonofrio shook his head. "No, just to steal *all* of it. If he's sleeping, a cautious person could make off with a fortune."

"But you'd better be far away when the dragon wakes up," said Earbes. "He's going to know right away that something is missing."

"Right," said Dru. "And he's going to go looking for it. Best thing to do is realm-hop for a decade or two."

"Not everyone has access to a portal," said Leery.

"There's always a way," said Gonofrio, flapping his hand at Dru. "But still. Even if our dragon had been sleeping a long time and couldn't find the thieves, he's not limited to the Locus of New York, or even this reality. He can acquire more treasure in any of the nine realms."

"Maybe his treasure is rolling through the venues he's hitting?" asked Leery. "Our wit said his partners were not above doing things a little fast and loose."

"We have three other cases," said Kathandra. "We've checked into them. One would definitely fence stolen dragon treasure, and one is questionable, but the other is above reproach."

"Hmm," said Dru. "Is anyone above temptation? The right deal?"

Gonofrio grinned at her. "I'll give you the address. You can go talk to the owner and assess him yourself, but he's Dragonkin, and I don't believe he'd take anything that smelled of dragons."

"Then..." said Leery, lifting a hand and miming pulling a rope.

Gonofrio grimaced.

"That's where Vinny's stuck," said Earbes.

"I'm not stuck! I'm *thinking*!"

"What if his treasure's gone?" said Leery. "All of it?"

Vinny shook his head and opened his mouth to speak, but Leery beat him to it.

"No, hold on. What if he was...*occupied* somehow? On a quest? I don't know...what do dragons do?"

"What if he was incarcerated?" asked Dru. The room got very quiet, and all eyes turned toward her. She blushed prettily and went on, "I mean, say the dragon was found guilty of some...dragony kind of crime and locked up? Wouldn't other dragons help themselves? Wouldn't the leprechauns? Knowing the dragon would be gone for years?"

"Maybe..." said Gonofrio.

"But still," said Earbes. "Why not spread it around?"

"Parole," said Leery, snapping his fingers

Gonofrio smiled at him. "I'll make you coffee anytime," he said.

4

Vinny and Leery stood huddled at one end of the table, a printout from the Department of Corrections spread out on the table in front of them. "This is such a waste! You'd think those idiots would embed search criteria in the data," said Gonofrio.

"Hey, it wouldn't be called bureaucracy if just anyone could make a mess of it. It's a calling," said Leery.

Vinny grunted a laugh.

At the other end of the table, Kathandra and Dru sat huddled around Dru's laptop, pecking away at keys, searching the locus identity databases for newly registered dragons. "At least they could hire the same inept people for all locus systems," said Dru. "You know, still

ruin them, but ruin them in a consistent manner."

Leery nudged Gonofrio and chuckled. "That's business, Dru, not government."

"Right, right," she said. "I forgot."

The door banged open, and a man with ruddy cheeks and salt-and-pepper hair stood outside. His gaze swept across each of them in turn, taking a moment to glower at Gonofrio before resting on the now-empty coffee pot and his eyes opened wide. "It's bad enough you make a pot and hog it all, Gonofrio, but to take the damn pot...that's just...that's just..." He shook his head.

"Mean?" offered Leery.

"Who are you?" snapped the man.

"Leery Oriscoe from the Two-Seven."

The man nodded. "Right. Van Helsing called. I'm Jamesy Sherikins."

"Come on, Captain," said Gonofrio. "We're *busy* in here. Working the jewelry store cases."

"What he means, Captain," said Earbes smoothly, "is that time got away from us. I'll be happy to make another pot."

"Gonofrio makes better coffee," muttered Sherikins.

"It's the holy water," said Leery, and an uncomfortable silence fell over the room.

"What do you have?" asked the captain.

"We're on to something," gushed Gonofrio. "It came down to why the dragon is focused on New York City. I mean, why not spread his wings and steal from multiple locations. Oriscoe came up with the idea." He beamed at Leery.

"Parole," said Leery.

"*Exactly*!" said Gonofrio. "We figure the perp must be restricted in his movements. Contained in the City, for some reason...an ankle bracelet or a monitoring tag. We're working on developing a list of sus—"

"Fine," said Sherikins. "I'll get a pot of water and bring it down to you. You'll pray over it, or whatever it is you do, and I'll take it from there."

"—pects..." Gonofrio's shoulders slumped. "Right you are, Captain."

"Fine," said the captain. His crazy gaze flitted around the room, then he turned on his heel and left, leaving the door open.

"It's..." said Vinny, looking at the door, then forcing his gaze back to the printouts. "We need to figure..." Again, his gaze rose and

drifted to the door. "That should be closed. When you barge into a room, interrupting people's train of thought, you *close* the door when you leave." He crossed the room and stuck his head out into the hall, then closed the door gently. "I mean, it's common courtesy, right?"

"Sure," said Leery, with a glance at Dru. "Where's that guy get off?"

"I know, right?" said Vinny, but his gaze once again centered on the printout spread out on the table in front of Leery. "We need to narrow this down. But how?"

"Maybe the patterns?" suggested Kathandra. "The robberies? I mean, once you—"

"No," said Gonofrio. "I imagine we'd still have too many people to watch."

"If the dragon's hoard was here, and he was imprisoned here, then..." said Dru.

Gonofrio snapped his fingers at her and capered like a little boy for a moment. "Right! Right! If he was *from* here, he'd have people to watch his hoard. Family or something."

"But if he was from somewhere else—"

"Or imprisoned far from his home and hoard—"

"Then it would be unguarded—"

"But not right away." Gonofrio beamed at them. "I thought you'd be a distraction"—his gaze snapped back and forth between Leery and Dru—"but I was wrong."

"Funny how that happens," said Leery with a wry grin.

"If our perp got arrested in another locus, I imagine he'd have people to watch over his hoard, but if it was a long sentence..." He let the thought dangle, assuming the manner of a teacher testing his students.

"Then his support would drift away over time. They'd get distracted with their own lives, their own hoards."

"Or they might even help themselves," said Leery. "But to get cross-jurisdictional parole, he'd need a family member here in the Locus of New York."

"Right." Gonofrio snapped his fingers and began leafing through the printout, humming a little tune under his breath. "And they'd need to be upstanding members of society. Beyond reproach!"

"Yeah, a witch doctor or a magister or something."

"What we should do is start with the most likely and work our way through the list, clearing them until we find someone we can't clear."

"It'd be faster if we split up," said Leery.

5

Oriscoe pulled the Crown Victoria to the curb and killed the ignition. He glanced over at Gonofrio, who held the center console cover in a white-knuckled grip. His other hand choked the Jesus-handle, while both legs were splayed out in front of him, feet pressed into the floorboard. Vinny stared out the front window, eyes wide, mouth agape.

"You all right, Gonofrio? I didn't take you for squeamish."

"I..." Gonofrio relaxed, muscle group by muscle group, as though he had to force his muscles to let go of the tension. "I'm not sure I've ever been on a ride like that, Oriscoe," he said as he peeled his hands off of the grab

handle. "Not sure I ever want to take another," he muttered.

"Yeah, then don't ever go to Gehenna with Dru. Her mother's driver...whew." Leery craned his neck. "Hey, you see a coffee shop?"

"You didn't get enough coffee back at 1PP?"

"Look, pal, the words 'enough' and 'coffee' should never appear in the same sentence."

"Uh, right." Gonofrio flipped open his leather-bound notebook, then squinted up at the brownstone next to the car. "327 West 88th Street," he read. "Perfect. That means our suspect lives on your side. My guess is that fancy stoop with the poured concrete steps."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," said Leery, twisting to look over his shoulder. "Oh! I know what to do." He pulled out his cell phone and opened the Starbucks app. After a few minutes of fiddling and cursing under his breath, he tapped the screen and smiled. "Dru wasn't wrong about this gadget! There's a Starbucks two blocks back. On Broadway."

"We just got here..." said Gonofrio.

"No better time to go get stocked up. Hold down the fort, Vinny." He popped his door open. "You take it the way Cthulhu wants us to drink it?"

"Don't blaspheme, Leery. Not with me."

"Right. Squeamishness. Check."

"It's not that—"

Leery swung the door closed and turned east.

6

Kathandra motioned for a car to pull out in front of them, then took the spot, moving the Crown Victoria with careful slowness. "I'm not sure..."

"You've got it," said Dru.

Earbes smiled and parked. "Which building?"

Dru pointed at the middle of the block. "That building with 'Old Guard' on the lintel."

"Nice block," said Kathandra. "So close to the greenspace." She pointed out the front windshield.

Dru nodded. "Sure. Nice neighborhood."

"Where do you live, Dru?"

"Oh, I have a little place on the Upper East Side."

"Oh-la-la," said Earbes with a grin.

Dru smiled. "How about you?"

"Inwood."

7

Leery got back in the car, balancing the drink holder with four *trentas*, then putting it down on the console between them. "I brought you a big one," he said.

"Then these three are for you?"

Leery shrugged.

"There are no public restrooms on this block," said Gonofrio after looking around.

"Why? You need to go? I'll watch the building. Head on up to Broadway. There's a bunch of crap up there, but most of it will be closing in forty-five minutes."

Vinny cocked his head to the side. "You mean to tell me you can drink 90 ounces of coffee and not need the restroom."

Leery picked up a cup and rocked it back and forth at Gonofrio. "A *trenta* holds thirty-one ounces."

"Then why's it called a *trenta*?"

Leery only looked at him.

"*Trenta* means 'thirty' in Italian," said Vinny.

"Oh." Leery turned and stared out the windshield for a moment. "Maybe someone screwed up. All I know is it's the biggest cup they have and it's one ounce shy." He took a slug. "You know, I have to force them to put coffee in it. They have some insane notion that it should only be used for cold drinks."

"Go figure," said Gonofrio.

"Where'd you learn Italian?"

"I'm one of the Nephilim, remember?"

"So?"

"One of the gifts is omnilingualism."

"Gesundheit."

"It means I can speak any and every language."

"Must be nice when you're in Starbucks and need to figure out their sizes."

"Uh...yeah."

8

As the sun started its slow slide from the sky, Earbes looked around, then turned back to Dru and smiled. "So, what do you think the boys are doing?"

Dru grinned. "Drinking coffee. Or talking about drinking coffee. It's kind of Leery's thing."

"On a stakeout?" Earbes shook her head. "Just thinking about it makes my bladder feel heavy."

"I'm not sure Leery even *has* a bladder. He can drink more coffee than anyone I've ever met and never once need to run to the little boy's room."

Earbes nodded, then pointed in the mirror. A tall, well-built man had turned the corner from West End Avenue and was walking slowly up the street. His head was up, and his gaze flicked restlessly from one side of the street to the other and then back again as though he knew they were watching him but didn't know from where.

"Think that's him?" asked Dru.

Earbes shrugged, her gaze locked on the mirror. "Best match yet," she said.

"Should we brace him? Or just watch and see where he goes?"

Kathandra made an uncertain moue. "If we brace him, we'd be tipping our hand. He'd see us get out, as hyper-vigilant as he's being. He'd check back later and see us watching his house."

"We could move the car."

Earbes shrugged. "These cars aren't hard to spot."

"No," agreed Dru. "We could call the boys, switch cars."

"We can do it if you want, but I'd rather wait. Let him get comfortable. See what he does."

"Fine by me," said Dru. She leaned forward a little to watch the man in the passenger-side mirror.

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, his face turned a little up, as though he were sampling the scents on the wind. He turned his head from side to side, nose still up in the air, then tensed.

"Uh-oh," said Dru.

But when the man lowered his gaze to take in the street again, he skipped right over their

car, focusing on something on the other side of the street—two seedy-looking zombies who came sauntering up the stairs from one of the basement level apartments up the street.

The man pulled his shoulders back and strode toward the pair of thugs, a grim smile decorating his face. "You'll get nothing this way," he called, still a quarter of the block away.

One of the thugs shrugged with his head. "Mama Rose Marie thinks different."

The suspect walked by the car without even a passing glance. His clothes were a deep maroon—so deep, they'd mistake them for black in the fading light. He was tall with interesting musculature but a little too lean to fit anyone's picture of perfection. He moved with a rolling sort of gait, fast and loose, arms swinging in counterpoint—the picture of confident readiness. "Well, you zees aren't known for intellect," he called. He raised a hand to spin vaguely at the side of his head. "Something about a lack of oxygen to the squishy bits as you die."

One of the zombies growled, but the other swept his arm across his middle to stop him and laughed. "Do you know how many of you

welshers try this tactic? I mean, if you're going to pull some shit, make it *original* shit."

"I've given my word," said the man, though his stride had slowed.

"Yeah, you gave that when you placed the bet, too. You said you had the money and would pay if you lost. Well, you lost."

"And I will pay," said the man with a nod. "I'm a little cash-poor, is all. I need a day or two to convert some gems to cash."

"Ah," breathed Kathandra.

"And that's the problem, you see? You never said you'd need time to pay up!" snapped the bigger of the two zombies.

"Plus, it's been a week," said the other. "What've you been doing this whole time?"

The man stopped about ten paces from the zees. "I've been trying to find a jeweler who is interested in my collection. The provenance is undocumented, you see."

The shorter zombie guffawed. "You need a fence? Why didn't you just say so?"

"Not a fence, per se, but a—"

"You need a fence, pal." The zee looked the suspect up and down. "So, you have the gems on you?"

"No, but they're close."

"Come on. I'll take you to a reliable fence. A real stand-up guy."

"And no doubt on the Zombie mafia's payroll. That way you zees get the bet, the vig, and the difference between what the fence will pay and what the gems are worth. No thanks."

The shorter zombie looked up at the bigger one and frowned. "I think he's calling us crooks."

"Most unfriendly," said the big one with a growl.

"I agree. I think my feelings are hurt."

The man in the maroon suit wore a wry smile as the little drama unfolded, but he held up his hand and said, "No offense meant. But I think I will continue to seek my own buyer. I only need a few more days."

The bigger zombie took a menacing step, but again, the short one stopped him with an arm across the belly. "Two days," he said. "And you'll pay two extra points for them."

The man in maroon cocked his head as if considering.

"It's either that or we gotta break something," said the short zombie. The big zombie cracked his knuckles and grinned.

"No need for threats," said the man. "Your terms are acceptable."

"Fine, then," said the short zombie. "If you haven't paid by this time Thursday, we'll have another...chat." His teeth gleamed in the dusk. "But I won't be so accommodating."

"Understood."

The two zombies nodded, then turned and strolled toward Riverside Drive.

"Have a good evening," the man in maroon called, then turned and jogged up his stoop and went inside.

"What do you think?" asked Earbes.

"I think we'd better follow him when he tries to fence the gems. Maybe they came from one of our robberies."

9

Leery straightened up behind the wheel and reached across the console to nudge Gonofrio. A tall, lean man had come out of the brownstone they were watching and stood at the top of his stoop, taking long,

leisurely looks in both directions. He lifted his chin a little, a pose Leery recognized instantly. "Hey, heads-up, Vinny. He's on the move."

Gonofrio sat slumped in the passenger seat, his head against the window. "I see him," he said as he straightened. "How are we supposed to tell if he's a dragon?"

Leery shrugged. "I don't know, but he's tasting the stink right now. I don't know any non-shifter that can do that."

"Doesn't mean there aren't any."

Leery shot him a cross glance. "We going to play this game all night? I say something, you counter, I reply, you counter?"

"Just pointing it out." Gonofrio shrugged.

The man on the stoop jogged down the stairs and into a pool of light from one of the streetlamps. He wore a dark-colored tracksuit with thin white stripes running down the arms and legs. He turned away from them and started trotting in place.

"Great," mumbled Leery. "A jogger. Want to shoot him and say he resisted?"

"Nope. Too much paperwork. Besides, it'll do you good after all that coffee."

"You and I have different definitions of what's good for me."

"Come on," said Vinny, sliding out of the car. "At least he's going toward the river. We can be two men strolling along, taking in the view."

"The view of the Henry Hudson Parkway?" But Leery got out of the car and came around to the sidewalk. "If only this neighborhood was civilized. I could use another coffee."

Vinny chuckled. "I'm pretty sure you can go the rest of the night on what you've already had."

"Don't blaspheme, Vinny. Not with me," Leery said.

Gonofrio lifted his hands in supplication and grinned from ear to ear. "Sorry, sorry."

Leery jerked his head at the retreating back of their subject. "Come on, let's get moving before he gets too far away and we have to jog, too."

10

Earbes jerked her chin at the suspect's apartment as lights came on in the foyer. "Looks like he's moving," she said.

Dru stifled a yawn and nodded. "At last."

The man came out to the stoop, looked in both directions, then jogged down to the sidewalk. He walked to a black Mercedes and got in.

Kathandra snorted. "Can't be hurting for money too much, driving a Merc."

"Are they expensive?" asked Dru.

"An SL580 droptop? Are you kidding?"

Dru shrugged. "I don't follow cars."

"Doesn't someone in your family? Your brother or your dad?"

"Sure. In Gehenna. Daddy loves his toys."

Earbes gaze flicked up to Dru's horns and then back down to look her in the eye. "I forgot."

"If I need a car for a fancy function, my mother lends me her driver."

"Your mother."

Dru nodded, keeping her gaze steady. "In Gehenna, I'm known as Drusilla bat Agrat."

"Oh, my," gushed Kathandra. "I follow your family! I can't believe I didn't recognize you right off!"

Up the street, the Mercedes roared to life, then swung around in the middle of the street and blasted away toward Riverside Drive. Dru hooked her thumb, and Earbes cranked the Crown Vic to life and followed.

11

A big Mercedes went roaring by as they turned the corner. Their suspect was a block away, running north, almost across from the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. "Come on," said Vinny, breaking into a jog.

"I knew this was going to happen. Maybe I better go back for the car."

"Nah. We've got this." He raised his arm and waved at Earbes and Dru as they flashed by in their Crown Vic.

"Uh-oh," said Leery, nodding toward the suspect, who stood stock-still, staring at them for a moment. Then the tableau broke, and he turned and sprinted through the evening traffic and into the park. "Shit! Come on, Vinny!" Leery jigged through the traffic and sprinted onto the concrete path that paralleled Riverside Drive.

The suspect glared at them over his shoulder, then veered into the shadows cast by the trees. Leery poured on the speed, Vinny pounding along behind him.

"Maybe you'd better—"

Screams erupted from the direction of the mall running parallel to the Henry Hudson Parkway.

"—change," panted Gonofrio. "I've got you."

Something large and matte black crashed through the line of trees that separated the park from the parkway, took two hopping steps, and erupted into the darkening sky. It flapped massive wings, fighting gravity for every inch of altitude, and then it was out over the Hudson, banking in a slow, majestic arc. The dragon's eyes glowed chartreuse as it opened its mouth and bellowed at them.

The sound was horrible. The air resounded with the dragon's pique, the roar coming at such a low pitch that Leery had to fight to keep the coffee inside his stomach. It increased in volume, resonating from the buildings across Riverside Drive, thrumming through the trees, and hammering at Leery's superhuman hearing like a constant peal of thunder, only a hundred times louder. He slapped his hands over his head and stumbled, then went down on one knee, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain.

The dragon roared again, and Leery screamed. He pitched forward on his face, hands clamped to the side of his head.

Silence fell over him—blessed silence—and he opened his eyes. Gonofrio stood between him and the dragon, a seven-foot-diameter disc of almost opaque air whirling in front of him like a shield. It glowed a superheated red and shed flame around its edges, but behind it, there was no dragon's roar.

With one last, baleful glare, the dragon wheeled on his wing tip and flew south.

"Holy—"

"No blaspheming, remember?" asked Gonofrio in a voice drained of all energy.

"Sorry," said Leery.

Vinny nodded and more collapsed than sat beside him. "Let's not do that again without a plan."

"Agreed." Leery sighed. "And maybe we don't need to mention this to our partners."

Gonofrio hit him with a shrewd look, then shrugged. "You're going to have to do something about that soon."

"I know," said Leery. "But what?"

Vinny shrugged. "Can't help you there."

12

The Mercedes darted in and out of traffic, moving much too fast, but the driver had uncanny reflexes—or perhaps a touch of precognition—and skated through situations that seemed destined for ambulances and wreckers. Earbes jammed the Crown Vic onto the sidewalk and hammered the accelerator.

Dru sat next to her, a placid expression on her face, almost seeming bored. "He made a

right onto 79th," she said. She started drawing gray runes in the air above her lap.

"How can he drive like that?"

"You should see Gregory drive," said Dru. "Mother's driver. He's transdimensional."

"Must be nice," muttered Kathandra. "I'm going to lose him!"

"No. I'll watch where he turns, you just focus on getting to the turns as fast as you can." She rolled down her window and flung the gray star like a Frisbee and it raced away on a tangent.

"*And* safely," said Earbes.

"Right, that, too." Dru pointed out the windshield. "Right on Amsterdam."

"You think he made us?"

Dru shrugged. "Maybe he likes driving like this. Like Leery."

The tires shrieked as Kathandra threw them into the turn, bumping the right-side tires over the curb. "I can't see him!"

"Relax," said Dru. "I've got a tracker on him. He's two blocks north of Broadway."

"He won't take Broadway all the way," said Earbes. "Isn't it closed to motor vehicle traffic between 53rd and 47th Street?"

"You mean cars? Yeah. I wouldn't test my luck with Broadway," said Dru. "I'd go 59th to 5th."

"Let's try to get ahead of him, or do you need line of sight?"

"With my tracker on him, there's no place he can go where he isn't in my line of sight."

"Good," said Earbes. "Tell me if he turns onto Broadway."

"He's doing it now," said Dru.

"Hit the wailer," said Earbes as she floored the accelerator. The Crown Vic came alive, engine screaming, siren shrieking, and raced south on Amsterdam. She drove fast, weaving around the other cars too slow to get out of their way.

13

Leery peered into the night sky, trying to catch sight of the gigantic dragon, but the beast's matte black scales made it invisible in the darkness. Gonofrio's energy returned at a rapid pace, and soon enough,

the big man got to his feet and came to stand next to Leery.

"See anything?" he asked.

"A few stars."

"Any of them chartreuse?"

Leery shook his head. "What now?"

"Now, we pray our partners have better luck with their suspect."

"Back to the car then?"

Gonofrio shrugged. "Might as well."

"Let's find a Starbucks, first."

Vinny sighed but clapped Leery on the back. "My treat."

14

Earbes brought the car to a smooth stop and flicked her sun visor down. A placard reading "MCU - NYPD" was clipped to the side visible from the windshield. She put the car in park and said, "Come on, Dru. He's seen the car, so let's go for a walk."

"Good idea." They walked half a block east on 48th Street, then stood at the plywood-

covered Lululemon window, two girlfriends chatting. The black Mercedes cruised by on Fifth Avenue, and they strolled down the block, arm-in-arm. "He's parking on 47th, right next to the jewelry store on the corner."

"Isn't this practically the same place as your case?" asked Earbes.

"It *is* the same place," said Dru. She pointed at the 47th Street Diamond Exchange. "Right there."

Kathandra gave a low whistle and nodded toward the corner. Their suspect stood on the opposite corner, waiting for the light at 47th Street. She slowed, pointing at the Sephora building. "Pretend we're talking about shopping at Sephora," she whispered. A sign on the boarded-over glass doors read, "Pardon our mess. We will be back tomorrow."

Dru stopped and frowned at the sign. "Look at that," she said. "Closed."

"I know," said Kathandra. "There should have been a notice on the webpage!"

The man in the maroon suit walked by them on the sidewalk, not even sparing them a glance. He beelined for the lobby of the Diamond Exchange, then stood looking at the building directory.

"Think this is more hyper-vigilance?" whispered Dru. "Most men at least look at beautiful women."

"If he is a dragon, I doubt his interests extend to succubi and pookas."

Dru shrugged. "Come on, he's heading for the elevators." She led Earbes into the lobby. "I know," Dru said, "but we can go to the store in Union Square after we speak to the jeweler."

"Okay," said Kathandra.

They walked to the same building directory their suspect had perused and stood gazing at it as the elevator doors slid shut. Then, they turned and watched the floor indicator to see which floor their suspect stopped on.

"Seven," said Dru and pressed the button to call the elevator back. When they arrived on the seventh floor, the hall was empty. "What now?"

"We open doors." Kathandra went to the door on the right, opened it, and looked inside. "Oh, sorry," she said with a spacey grin. "Wrong door."

They each took one and performed the same ditz routine until Dru found the right door. "Oh, it's here, Kath," she said.

They stepped into the shop called the JewelLab and approached the counter.

"Sorry, ladies," said a pudgy man sitting at a desk. "After hours you need an appointment."

"Oh, darn," said Kathandra. "I really need to have this ring looked at." She smiled at the man in the maroon suit who sat across the desk from the pudgy man.

"You can return before five tomorrow, and I'll happily help you."

"Are you sure you can't help her tonight?" asked Dru. She smiled her best smile and winked at the jeweler, and the man's eyes lit up like she'd put a power main in his lap. "We'd be happy to wait for you to finish helping this gentleman. We've come all the way from Inwood."

"Well..." The jeweler looked around and twitched. He appeared to have forgotten the other man entirely.

"Pretty please," crooned Dru.

"Yes! Yes, that will be fine," said the jeweler. "One moment." He turned to the man in the maroon suit. "Mr. Friner, I'll have to examine the stone, sir, before I can give you a price—even an estimate."

Mr. Friner narrowed his eyes and glanced at Dru and then at Kathandra. "I was assured this would be a private conversation."

"Oh, don't mind us," said Earbes. "We'll go over here in the corner." She took Dru by the hand and led her behind the counter and to the farthest corner, her ears twitching into those of a small cat.

Friner grunted—a particularly disturbing sound, like the cough of a tiger getting ready to defend his turf—but turned his back on them. "Fine!" he snapped and passed a velvet bag across the desk.

The jeweler's eyes widened as he took the bag. "Quite large," he said.

"Yes."

The jeweler opened the bag and poured its contents on the leather blotter on his desk. A bright blue tanzanite the size of a strawberry tumbled out. "Oh, my," the jeweler murmured. He examined the stone with his loupe. "Extraordinary." He stood, cradling the gem in the velvet bag, and then he crossed the room to a high counter equipped with microscopes. Friner followed him. The jeweler examined the stone. "My, my," he said. "I've never seen its

like. I'll have to weigh it, of course, but I can offer you a thousand dollars a carat."

"Ha!" snorted Friner. "We both know it's worth fifteen hundred."

"Hardly. Not if the situation is as you alluded to on the phone," said the jeweler. "I can go as high as eleven hundred."

"Then I'll take my business elsewhere," said Friner in a cold voice.

"Okay, okay," said the jeweler. "Twelve-fifty, but not a penny more."

"Done," said Friner.

"And this tanzanite is an heirloom, you said? No papers?" He shot a nervous glance at Kathandra and Dru. "I will have to check the database for stolen—"

"We'll do that for you," said Kathandra, flipping her badge onto the counter. "NYPD."

15

Leery led Vinny into the Supernatural Inquisitors squad room, the Nephilim sipping from a *trenta*-sized cup of coffee. He smiled at Dru and Kathandra. "Good work, you two," he said. "I'm getting a cup. Anyone want one?"

Vinny shook his head. "You, sir, are some kind of monster when it comes to coffee. You've had what, four *trentas* since we left 1PP?"

Leery shrugged. "It's an off night. Sometimes it just goes that way."

"You mean you normally drink less?" asked Earbes.

"No," said Dru with a chuckle. "More."

Leery shrugged. "It's a gift. Kathandra? Coffee? Dru, I know you'll want seven sugars."

Dru nodded.

"No thanks," said Earbes. "It keeps me awake if I drink any after four in the afternoon."

Leery looked at her as if she'd admitted to a taste for the flesh of small children, then shook his head. "I'll be right back."

"So," said Vinny, "who does the interview?"

"Our house, our room," said Dru.

"True," said Kathandra, "but you should see Vinny work. He's an incredible interviewer."

Dru cocked her head and looked at Vinny through narrowed lids. "Gifts of your birth, eh?"

Vinny shrugged. "Might as well use it. Plus, since I can speak every language, sometimes I can catch something others might miss."

"That and your perception," said Dru.

"And angelic empathy," said Vinny without a trace of conceit.

Dru only looked at him—and he returned her appraising stare with an open expression—until Leery came back with two mugs of java. "Hey, what'd I miss?" he asked.

"Kathandra thinks she and Vinny should do the interview. I agree."

Leery looked at the MCU detectives and shrugged. "Sure. Why not? Just don't leave a mess."

"I'll get the lieu and meet you in observation," said Dru.

"Right. Interview room's through that door," he said, pointing at it with his mug. Then he turned and went through the closer door.

Looking through the one-way glass, he saw the man Dru and Kathandra had arrested. He sat still, neither looking around nor fidgeting. The door opened, and the two MCU detectives entered, Vinny with his leather-bound notebook and an armful of files. "I'm telling you, Earbes, you've got the wrong guy," he said and made a show of juggling the notebook and the folders.

"No, Vinny. We *watched* him try to fence a huge tanzanite. One he can't prove he owns." She pulled out a chair and sat down.

Dru and Van Helsing came into the observation room, and the lieutenant's eyebrows arched. "Thought you were territorial about the interviews?" she asked.

"Usually, but I wanted to see how one of the Nephilim would do it."

Vinny dropped his armload on the table and sank down beside her. He made a show of shuffling through the folders. "No, you must be wrong. I have it right here." He pawed through the stack again. "Somewhere."

Earbes rolled her eyes and clucked her tongue. "Vinny. Listen to me. We—"

"Ha!" Vinny crowed. "It's right here! Read it and weep, Earbes." He handed her a thick file, and she began to leaf through it, pretending to scan the blank pages. Vinny turned back to the man in the maroon suit. "I'm really sorry about this," he said. "She gets a bee in her bonnet, and... Anyway. I'm Vinny Gonofrio." He extended his hand across the table.

"Risatour Friner," said the man. He grasped Vinny's hand and gave it a brisk shake. "And I *am* the wrong man."

"Oh, I know," said Vinny. "So sorry about Earbes, here. It's just a matter of dotting the i's and crossing the t's from here." He unzipped his leather-bound notebook and flipped it open. "Let's see." He scanned a few pages and then smiled. "Ah! Here it is. How long have you been living as a human?" He slowly uncapped his pen and wrote something on his pad.

"What do you mean?"

"You're a dragon, right?" said Earbes without looking up.

Vinny shrugged. "We know you are, so let's skip the part where you deny it."

Friner nodded his head. "I've been living in New York City for..." He gazed up at the ceiling. "Oh, let's call it the better part of a century."

"Wow! You must have seen some changes," said Vinny, jotting something down in his notebook. "I mean, horses to cars, right?"

Friner shrugged. "True. But you asked how long I've been pretending to be human, and the answer is, 'never.' I've made no illusions, no deceptions. If someone asks, I freely admit what I am."

"That's good," mused Vinny. "And your apartment?"

"What about it?"

"Have you...made any alterations?"

Friner rolled his eyes. "If you're asking about my hoard, I see no reason to disclose that."

"Oh, sure," said Vinny. "I was only curious. But now that you mention it, who looked after it while you were imprisoned?"

Friner sniffed, though his expression stayed carefully neutral. "I have friends."

"I'll bet. I'd love to be friends with a dragon." Vinny grinned like a kid in a candy store. "I mean, who wouldn't? Right, Earbes? Who wouldn't?"

"Whatever you say, Vinny," she said.

"They're pretty good," said Leery. "Variation of good cop, bad cop, I'd say."

Dru grinned. "I'm surprised, though. I mean she's such a goody-goody, you'd think she'd be the one playing nice. And, what with his attitude back at 1PP, you'd think he could play bad cop with ease."

In the interview room, Vinny was switching his gaze back and forth between Earbes and Friner, a big grin on his face and almost bouncing in his seat. "Hey, can you tell me what it's like to fly?"

Earbes snorted and turned another blank sheet of printer paper.

Friner sniffed. "It's an exultant feeling. The wind beneath my wings, the other flying creatures running scared. Sometimes I hunt just for the pleasure of it."

"Oh, I'll bet," said Vinny. "It must be fun to wallow in your treasure, too. Do you have huge piles of gold?"

"Not as much as I once had." He shrugged. "These days, many dragons have switched to hoarding data, cybercurrencies, and ebooks, but they don't provide the same tactile rewards. Data doesn't chime against my

scales. Cybercurrency doesn't smell of the earth and time."

"Oh, sure," said Vinny. "And ebooks? Well, they're hardly books at all, are they? Just light on a screen."

"Hey, I *like* my Kindle," said Earbes.

"Sure, but it's not *a book*," said Vinny.

"No, it's an entire *library*, Vinny. And it weighs less than a pound."

"Yeah. I guess." He turned back to Friner with a grin. "But there's something about the old ways, isn't there?"

Friner nodded.

"Like gems. I heard dragons always love a good gem."

Friner cocked his head, a small smile on his face. "I certainly do."

Vinny looked down at his notebook. "Oh. Right. Listen, the lieutenant of this squad is a real stickler. They're working a string of jewelry store burglaries." He glanced up at Friner with a sheepish look in his eyes. "I mean, I know you're innocent, but I have to ask why you were caught red-handed fencing a tanzanite."

Friner sniffed. "Is it 'fencing' if the gem is mine?"

"No, then it's just selling it."

"Right," said Friner. "And that's what I was doing—selling it without paperwork."

"Selling it without proof of ownership?" Vinny looked at Earbes askance. "You must not get full value that way. Wouldn't it be better to get copies of the lost paperwork?"

"I've never had paperwork on that stone. It's been in my possession for thirteen centuries. The idea of provenance is a modern invention."

"Thirteen centuries? Whew!" said Vinny, shaking his head. "That's a long time!"

Friner gazed steadily at him. "Come now, Detective. The time for this foolishness has ended. To one of the Nephilim, thirteen centuries is a blink of the eye."

Vinny leaned back in the chair and shrugged. "Same as for dragons."

"True."

"So, what are we supposed to do?" asked Earbes. "Take you at your word?"

Vinny cocked his head. "Yes. That's exactly what we're going to do. Sorry to have disrupted your evening, Mr. Friner. You're free to go."

"Well, I'll be..." Van Helsing disappeared from the observation room and reappeared in a heartbeat on the other side of the glass. "In

my precinct, Detective Gonofrio, I say when a suspect may leave."

Vinny held up his hands in supplication. "Sorry, sorry. You're right. It's only that Mr. Friner is innocent."

"Forgive us, Mr. Friner. We'll be just a moment." Van Helsing turned back to Vinny. "Outside. Now."

In the observation room, Leery said, "Uh-oh."

Van Helsing, Gonofrio, and Earbes tramped into the observation room in silence, and Kathandra closed the door quietly behind them.

"I hadn't taken you for a foozler, Gonofrio," said Epatha. "This performance of yours had better be leading somewhere."

"Not at all, Lieutenant. I meant it. He's innocent."

"Don't be a vazey cove, Detective. We can't just take that hornswoggler at his word!"

"Lieutenant Van Helsing, I assure you that I am doing nothing of the kind. But he is telling the truth. The tanzanite is his, and it's been part of his treasure trove for a long, long time."

"Why are you so sure he's innocent?"

"I'm one of the Nephilim, Lieutenant. Every ounce of my being tells me he's telling the truth, but there's a better reason."

"Explain," said Van Helsing.

"He came willingly. He didn't have to. He's a dragon."

Van Helsing stared at him for a moment, then gave Leery a curt nod. "Turn him loose."

The four of them walked Friner out of the building, then stood on the sidewalk, watching Friner stroll toward the corner. He'd refused a ride back to his car but offered to keep his ear to the ground for any dragon behaving badly.

"That's one way to clear a guy," said Leery.

Vinny shrugged. "It is what it is."

"Now what?" asked Earbes.

"The guy Leery and I were watching took off. We should watch his place until he comes back."

"And the Diamond Exchange," said Leery.

"That's a lot of manpower," said Earbes. "The bosses will never go for it."

Vinny grimaced. "Sometimes you have to—"

"No," said Dru. "Kathandra's correct. Plus, there's a better way."

"Do tell," said Gonofrio with a grin.

16

The next morning, Sam McCoy looked up at them from across his desk, bleary-eyed and grumpy. "I haven't even had my coffee," he groused. "I'm making a rule. No requests for large sums of money before I've had my coffee."

Leery grinned. "That's a rule I can get behind, McCoy. At least a cup."

McCoy flashed a sour, lopsided smile. "Why do you need two hundred thousand dollars?"

"To buy a pretty rock," said Leery.

"To buy a 100-carat tanzanite and to have a little cash to flash around."

"And why do we need a tanzanite the size of a strawberry?"

"Bait," said Gonofrio.

"For the jewelry-thieving dragon."

"Right," said Leery.

"And the flash money?"

"Same reason," said Dru. "We have to look legitimate."

"Or illegitimate," said Leery.

"Legitimately illegitimate," said Gonofrio.

Sam sighed and looked mournfully at his empty coffee cup. "Is there even a tanzanite that big for sale?"

Leery smiled. "Relax, Counselor. We know a guy."

Shaking his head, Sam signed the requisition slip. "Don't spend it in Atlantic City."

17

Leery shook his head and frowned for the fiftieth or sixtieth time since they got off the elevator. "This is silly," he breathed. "This won't fool anyone. I'm a cop, and I don't know the first thing about jewelry. No one's going to buy me as anything else." Bill Hartman had suggested the location, and he'd talked the owners of Gem Gab, Inc., into cooperating with the police for a sting.

"Relax," said Dru. "I know a thing or two about jewels. You're just hired muscle."

"Like with the Dead Set."

"Right."

"Then give me the briefcase." Dru handed it over and he held it with both hands, turning it sideways in front of him like a shield. "Good. That's better."

"Whatever you say, Leery," she said with a grin.

He set the briefcase between his feet and crossed his arms. "I sure hope Gonofrio and Earbes don't mess up."

"They won't, worry-wart."

"Hey, technology like that is—"

"Leery. It's a digital recorder, not a rocket ship."

"Rockets, I understand. Lots of fuel, a match, *boom*, into space."

"That's not really how—"

"Oh, sure it is, Dru. How else would you set something alight? Haven't you ever set off a bottle rocket? Same thing." He tried, but he couldn't keep his lips from twitching.

"Jerk," she purred and thumped him with her shoulder.

"What time is he—"

"Nine-thirty. It hasn't changed since you asked last time."

"And what time—"

"Nine-twenty-two."

"At least that has changed since I last asked."

"Yes," she said with a grin. "Two minutes have elapsed."

"This is the longest I've gone without coffee."

"It must be torture for you."

"Oh, it is, Dru. It is."

18

At nine-thirty on the dot, the elevator out in the hall dinged. Dru settled herself behind the Gem Gab owner's desk and spread the stacked papers out as though she'd been doing paperwork as she waited. "Showtime," she said.

Leery grunted but smiled. "I got that from the sound of the elevator."

"Did you know elevators are run by electronic circuits?"

"You mean it's not magic?"

"Nope. *Computers*, Leery."

Leery opened his mouth, but before he could say anything suitably sassy, the door creaked open.

"Mr. Agon?" asked Dru.

The tall, thin man who stepped inside wore a black suit. "*Doctor* Agon, actually. David Robert Agon, Ph.D.," he said, extending his hand and walking toward her. As he came on, his gaze flicked around the room, noting the position of the security cameras at least three times, and marking Leery twice. "My, my. Such security for just little old me? I thought we agreed this meeting would go unobserved."

"The cameras are off, as agreed," said Dru. "You are interested in buying or selling?"

"Maybe a bit of both, provided the first deal goes to my liking."

"Then let's make sure it does," she said with a smile.

"The cameras may be off, but..." Agon raised his gaze to meet Leery's bored stare.

"Oh, don't mind him. He's like an old guard dog. I keep him around more for the pleasure of his company than anything else these days."

"Still... Six eyes on any deal are two too many."

Dru shrugged. "He stays. I insist."

Agon frowned.

"But I'll give you a two percent discount to make up for my insistence."

Agon's eyes narrowed. "Five."

"Two and a half."

"Four."

"We can do this all night, cutting the slice thinner and thinner, but it bores me, to be honest. Three, final offer."

"Done. First, make me an offer on this gem. I have no paperwork, but I assure you I am its legitimate owner."

"Oh, I've no doubt," said Dru.

He pulled a folded piece of felt from his pocket and unfolded it. Inside was a small black opal.

"Exquisite cut," Dru said. "Ten carats?"

Agon nodded. "You've a good eye."

"One of the hazards of dealing in gems. I'll have to measure it, of course."

"Of course. But first, your price per ounce." His eyelids narrowed to shrewd slits.

"I can't give you that until I examine the stone."

Agon nodded, and Dru walked over to a microscope. "Pretty," she said. "I do love the kaleidoscopic nature of black opal." She

peered into the microscope for a few more minutes. "And I thank you for not trying to pass off a fake." She dropped it onto a small digital scale next to the microscope. "Ten carats, more or less," she said with a grin at Agon. "I'll give you eighty-seven thousand dollars for it."

Agon shook his head. "An even hundred." He glanced at Leery. "Plus three percent."

Dru pretended to consider it, then shook her head. "No. Ninety."

"My dear," said Agon, "I was born at night, it's true, but not *last* night. Ninety-seven."

Dru took the stone off the scale and held it out to him. "No paperwork means no full-price offers, let alone a premium."

Agon glanced at the stone in her hand. "Ninety-three, but"—he held up his hand to interrupt Dru's refusal—"I'll hold the cash and give it back to you for a quantity of gold."

Dru cocked her head. "How much gold?"

"Let's say the retail value of one hundred thousand dollars. You'll pay wholesale for it, of course, so there's added profit."

"I could only give you thirty-two ounces."

"I prefer coin."

Dru nodded. "Thirty-two American Gold Eagles, then." She glanced at the safe. "I may have them on hand. Not pure gold but over ninety-percent purity guaranteed."

Agon thought for a moment, then nodded. "And the other piece of business? You have the stone? The tanzanite?"

Dru smiled and nodded. "I do, indeed. 100 carats at thirteen fifty a carat—one hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars. You have the cash?"

Agon flashed a weak smile at her. "Less three percent."

"How careless of me. One hundred thirty..."

"One hundred thirty thousand nine hundred fifty dollars," said Agon. "And yes, I have it. But first, I need to see the stone and use your equipment to verify its authenticity."

Dru made a show of looking him up and down. "No duffel bag. Wherever are you hiding that much cash?" She glanced over her shoulder at Leery.

Agon smiled and reached to the side. His hand disappeared for a moment, then, as he pulled his hand back, it held a filled duffle bag.

Dru clapped her hands. "A dimensional vault! How interesting!"

"And the stone?"

Dru glanced at Leery and nodded. He picked up the briefcase and lay it on the counter beside her. He thumbed the combination into the case and opened it, then stepped back. Dru reached inside and brought out Friner's velvet bag with the tanzanite inside. "Here you are," she said, opening the bag with a flourish.

Agon took the gem in his palm and peered down at it with an expression like that of a glutton at a Golden Corral. "May I?" he asked without looking up.

"Of course. Make yourself at home."

He stepped up to the microscope and placed the tanzanite on the stage. "It's so big," he cackled. "Will it even fit?" He leaned forward eagerly and pressed his eyes to the twin eyepieces.

As soon as he did, Dru began spinning an acid-yellow set of runes together, and Leery stepped out of his Florsheims, undoing his belt as he did so.

"Oh, this is lovely," said Agon in a faraway voice.

Dru murmured the activation phrase for her rune set in the *Verba Patiendi*.

"Agon, you're under arrest," said Leery.

Dr. Agon jerked his head away from the microscope and snarled, "What's this?" He glared at the yellow runes and narrowed his eyes. "*I won't go back*!" he screeched.

Dru flung the rune set at him and it split, then split again as it twisted through the air toward Agon. Leery fast-changed and stepped forward, grabbing Agon by the upper arms and pressing him back into the counter. The rune sets splashed across his body, one wrapping his wrists together, one his ankles, one settling over his tongue to pin it down, and the last wrapping around his head to squeeze his jaws shut.

Agon's eyes widened, irises seeming to spin with rage. He glared at Dru, then shifted his gaze to Leery. A low rumble issued from his throat, then his gaze went flicking around the room at the speed of light. After a heartbeat, items began to levitate, then spin in place—a stapler from the desk, a metal trash can, a microscope from across the room, the coatrack. After another heartbeat, they flew across the room and slammed into Leery, pummeling him away from Agon and knocking him to his knees.

"Dammit!" Dru cried. "We need you!"

Agon pulled his head back, staring at her in confusion. Then his seething glare seemed to ignite, his irises spinning faster and faster. The skin of his cheeks began to dimple and twitch, forming the shape of scales.

"Hurry!" Dru cried. She began sketching runes with a hurried hand.

Leery staggered to his feet and shook his head like a stunned dog. He spun and charged Agon from the side, talons out, a snarl twisting his lupine features with fury.

Agon snapped his head around, his glare settling on Leery like an eagle striking a hare. He squinted his eyes, and the air grew hot, superheated gas erupting from the caldera of a pissed-off volcano. Leery just had time to throw his arms up before the air exploded into flames, knocking him back, setting his fur alight.

"No!" screamed Dru. She hurled a vermilion twelve-pointed star of runes at Agon and immediately began to draw another set in the air, this time, in burnished gold.

Leery flipped end-for-end into the wall behind him, and the paint began to bubble and peel.

"*Now,* Gonofrio! *We need you now*!" Dru shrieked as she connected seventeen runes with burnished gold lines. She began chanting in the *Lingua Tenebris Lacuna*—that spidery tongue spoken by her aunts and mother—then slapped the runes on Agon's chest with a flat hand.

The heat dropped instantly, and the paint by Leery stopped bubbling. Agon twisted his head and glared at Dru for a split second, then looked down at the runes glowing on his chest. When he raised his face, raw, primitive fury contorted his features, but the scales looked more distinct rather than less as she'd intended.

"I tried to mesmerize him, Gonofrio! It...it..." she backed away, eyes going wide, as Agon's hair melted together—joining into dagger-shaped scales that swept over his head and rippled into his coat. "Oh, no!"

In the hall, the elevator dinged.

Dru's acid yellow spells of binding shattered asunder, and Agon stepped toward her as she backed up, his face fierce, his flesh twisting, reshaping itself. His shoulders shivered, then with a tremendous crack, Agon's back broke, bending him in half like a grotesque jack-in-

the-box, eyes glowing chartreuse, blood running green from his mouth.

Across the room, Leery rolled and rolled, whimpering and howling, trying to put out the flames.

The transforming dragon fell forward, thumb joints snapping and melting into the creature's palm. His legs and arms grew thicker, thicker, and thicker still, and the floor creaked beneath his increasing weight.

Dru turned and sprinted toward the door, spinning more runes to life with each hand, one set a glowing electric blue, the other a deep, dead burnt red. "Mother!" she cried.

Agon came for her, scuttling forward with the insane speed of an insect, moving on all fours. He roared then, a basso note at the very edge of her hearing that shook her from her feet and echoed thunderously in her head. He stalked forward, grimacing as his bones broke and reset, as his mass trebled, then trebled again in the next second. The ceiling cracked, plaster dust showering down, the Gem Gab's furniture ignored and crushed and forgotten, and not any sort of impediment to begin with.

Dru shoved and kicked and scrambled with her feet, trying to keep space between them,

but she couldn't move fast enough to outpace his inexorable growth, his strutting pace toward her. "Mommy! I need you!" she screamed.

Agon's face, now fully formed into that of a young dragon, twisted with a hateful smile. The roof crashed to the floor around him as his giant matte black wings sprouted whole from his shoulders. He opened his mouth, exposing golden fangs, and his yellow, bifurcated tongue lolled out as though to lick her face.

Leery, charred, smoking, and largely without fur, slammed into Agon from the side, a whirling dervish of snapping teeth, slashing claws, and frantic, pummeling, wild blows. Agon batted him aside, and Leery exploded through the wall as though he were nothing more than a discarded rag doll. With a roaring hiss like fat in the fire, Agon sent a huge plume of flame through the hole in the wall, and Dru screamed.

The door slammed open, and Vinny Gonofrio stood outside, eyes burning with righteous anger. Agon bounced his gaze from Dru to Vinny and back again, and the Nephilim followed it, read the fear and pain in Dru's face, set his jaw, and streaked into the

room, his movements a blur of speed and agility. He threw an uppercut that, had it hit any other beast, would have ended the battle right there, but Agon was no ordinary beast, and the black dragon shrugged it off, butting at him with a head the size of a mature dragon, hissing like a Jörmungandr during Ragnarök.

The dragon cracked his jaw open impossibly wide and spewed flame at Gonofrio, but the same seven-foot-diameter disc of magic he'd used to protect Leery in the park flashed into existence. The fire slapped against it, driving Vinny back with its sheer force, but could not penetrate it. Agon roared and twisted his serpentine neck back to glare at Dru. He lunged forward, jaws agape.

The air crackled and thunder rang out as though Jörmungandr had indeed loosed her tail and began the end of the world. A rent appeared in front of Dru, and a thick liquid blackness gushed out—like the ink of a horrible sea creature—and the rent tore wider and wider and wider still.

Agon pulled his head back, narrowing his eyes, his wings held aloft, primed for a mighty downstroke that would launch him through the floors above. He roared at the darkness

gushing from the wound in reality, but that ebony void didn't care.

Agrat bat Mahlat had nothing to fear from a mere dragon, but the reverse was not true at all. The viscid shadow swirled and danced and grew limbs. First, the finest set of legs any man had ever seen appeared, then shapely arms and long, delicate fingers, a thin neck, and a face of obsidian with elfin features that writhed with wrath. She used those thin, dainty fingers to flick at the air to either side, and legions of demons appeared, packing into the too-small space, overlapping, merging, melding into creatures more gruesome than ever. Agon roared at them, and Gregory stepped forward to roar back, molten lava bubbling out of his mouth like spittle, every bit as loud and forceful as Agon's roar had been.

Agrat grew and grew and grew, still stunningly beautiful, and her shoulders shattered what remained of the roof. Flesh grew around the darkness, and she danced, naked and fetching—except for her rabid expression—spinning faster and faster, careless of the demons she now dwarfed, arms outstretched to slash at the air, head rocking and spinning with wild abandon.

Agon scuttled back, and Gregory was there, a massive punch already swung, already connected, already staggering the dragon before he knew the demon was even there, stunning him, making the dragon stumble, then reel.

Quick as Jörmungandr, Agrat bat Mahlat struck, her face wrapped into a hateful, stormy grimace. She leaped high in the air, spun, and slashed her extended foot at Agon. The dragon twisted, lunging sideways in his terror, and the Dancing Roof-Demon's strike tore a horrible wound across his shoulder, sending dagger-shaped scales spinning to stab into the walls. She continued her impossible floating spin, raising her other leg and cocking it, driving her knee into the side of Agon's head, knocking his sinuous neck to the side, then following the knee with an elbow strike that might have split mountains—and indeed had in other times. The dragon staggered sideways, obliterating another wall.

Behind their queen and commander, two legions of demons shrieked their hellish war cries and charged to support She of the Great and Terrible Name. Gregory roared his blast-furnace cry and stomped on Agon's tail, and

both he and the tail disappeared through the floor. In an instant, Gregory was back, this time on the other side of Agon's head, and he batted the dragon's face with boulders of hot magma, driving him back toward Agrat for another serving of ass-kickery.

In her terrible, fuming rage, Agrat's eyes glowed vermilion, and lazy black smoke curled from her nostrils. She danced to the side, then spun, slashing at Agon's eyes with razor-sharp nails of obsidian, grown suddenly as long as daggers. The punch-drunk dragon reeled away, stumbling into Gregory and his volcanic fury, then staggered back into the Cuisinart that was the Queen of the Shabbat. Agrat smashed his body with kicks, knees, elbows, and fists like stone. She slashed at him with her nails, striking sparks from his scales and slashing through them as though they were paper. She snarled and snapped her teeth at him, and Agon lurched away again, this time into the two legions of demons crowding between the dragon and Dru.

"*NO*!" thundered the Sovereign of Demons and mother of Drusilla. She leaped higher than ever, collapsing two floors above them, and came down on Agon's back with a

resounding crack. The dragon screeched in agony, his back legs flopping uselessly, wings thrashing at the air, but without his powerful rear legs to hurl him into the air, he was going nowhere.

Agrat leaned forward, towering over him like a black widow, poised to strike, and Agon whimpered. Her eyes burned and pulsed. "Don't quit," she crooned. "I'm still angry with you." Beside her, Gregory growled, and it sounded like a massive earthquake. In front, the legions she'd brought screeched and shrieked and cajoled Agon to fight on.

With a shudder, Agon began to transform, wilting like a dead flower, shriveling like a salted slug.

Above him, Agrat bat Mahlat grinned, and madness lived in her eyes.

19

Dru scrambled to her feet and rushed to the werewolf-sized hole in the wall. Without any sign of hesitation, she dashed through it, heedless of her $3500 shoes, reckless of the danger of the wall or ceiling's collapse, mindless in her fear for Leery, almost panicked, almost raving, almost insane with worry.

She found him in the crumpled remains of the furniture belonging to the suite next to Gem Gab, curled in a blistered ball of charred and crackled skin, mouth open in an endless, soundless scream, entire sections of his flesh burned away to leave bone exposed to the air, muscles, tissues, and organs, lumps of burnt meat, but alive—barely. Her fingers twitched and danced in midair, drawing runes of brilliant azure and weaving them together with a nineteen-pointed star of glistening gold. She grated a phrase in Enochian, though her lips split and cracked as the words flew past them, and her voice gained more and more guttural distortion with each one. Tears rained down

her cheeks as she gently lay the rune set on him. He gave a long sigh, and his blackened eyelids slid shut.

"I could have done that and saved you the pain," said Vinny from behind her.

She whirled on him, fury pounding in every beat of her heart. "*Where were you*?" she screamed at him in her broken voice. "I wouldn't have had to—" Her voice broke and she whipped a hand toward Leery. "He wouldn't be—" Her voice cracked again, and she gave up.

Gonofrio dropped his gaze to the floor. "I tried, Dru. There was no elevator and—"

"And these?" asked Agrat, now shrunk to human size and standing naked in the hole Leery had smashed in the wall. She flicked her fingers and a marvelous set of wings the color of thunderclouds appeared behind Gonofrio. "Did they need the elevator, too?" she hissed.

Vinny glanced at her and blushed. "Your Majesty," he murmured. "I..." He shook his head and dropped his head forward. "I didn't think—"

"No, it's clear you didn't!" snapped Agrat. She strutted into the room like a cat in heat—but with an unquantified menace—and didn't

stop until she stood mere inches away from him. "And my daughter was nearly torn limb from limb because of it."

Vinny swallowed. "I got here as fast as I could. None of us expect—"

"What? None of you expected a dragon to fight you?" Agrat's eyes crackled with fury. "Are you so blind? Has your angelic DNA made you stupid?"

"We should have planned for this. Earbes and I should have been next door, but the bosses wanted us with the techs, monitoring the recording. And your daughter and her partner are no—"

"Dragons!" snapped Agrat, her face once again grown terrible with hot indignation.

"No," said Vinny, regaining some of his normal calm. "But your daughter is a Princess of Hell—"

"*Gehenna*!" snapped Agrat.

"—and Leery is one of the strongest wolves in the locus."

"Must I repeat myself?" demanded Agrat, wisps of smoke curling from her nose and ears.

"No, Your Majesty," said Vinny. "You are entirely correct."

"*Of course I am*!" She whirled away as though he were nothing and walked over to stand next to her daughter. She lay her hand on Dru's shoulder, then looked down at Leery. Her gaze flicked across the rune set and a line appeared between her brows. "Oh, Dizzy," she said. "You shouldn't have risked that."

"Had to, Mommy," whispered Dru in a voice like tearing sheet metal.

"It won't do, baby girl, to become too familiar with the Adversary's blessings." She looked at Dru's lips. "And just look at what that nasty language has done to your beautiful lips." She closed her eyes and chanted something in the *Lingua Tenebris Lacuna*, and just like that, Dru's lips began to heal.

"I added a rune for stasis," said Dru in her roughened voice. "He's hurt, Mommy. He's hurt bad."

"Yes, dearest, but he's Pack. He would have healed without your sacrifice, and with it, he should be up and around within a few months." She pointed at Leery, whose charred and blackened flesh had already begun to slough off gray dead patches.

"He's in pain, and I... I can't stand it."

"I know, baby girl. I know." Despite her terrible anger at Agon, despite the display of combat, Agrat managed to croon the words as she hugged her daughter and kissed her on the cheek.

Behind them, Vinny cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, I'd like to transport Agon to a secure facility. May I borrow your...uh...warriors? I'd hate for him to escape."

Agrat glared at him over her shoulder. "I don't suppose you can call on the Host?"

Vinny sniffed. "Not really. The Lord doesn't like me much."

"You don't say," said Agrat in a voice utterly devoid of warmth. "And with all that to like." She shrugged. "Gregory!"

The massive demon appeared instantly, looming over Vinny, eyes glowing bright orange, black and lava-orange skin covered in plates of basalt and deadly spines. He curled his hands into fists. "*Nephil*," he grated. "Does he threaten you, Majesties?"

"As if," grunted Agrat. "He needs to take charge of that...that...beast and transport him away. You will lead the Thirteenth and Seventeenth Legions and see the dragon

imprisoned at the location the Nephil takes you to. If you deem the place unsatisfactory, take the dragon to Gehenna and imprison him there."

"And must I speak to the Unworthy One?"

"Enough to be polite, Gregory, though you will accommodate reasonable requests to bar that beast from escaping, should the Nephil make any."

A grumble came from deep in Gregory's chest. "Very well."

"Before he does that, Mommy, can Gregory take Leery—"

"Oh! Of course, my dear one."

Gregory turned and his gaze fell to Leery's crumpled, crispy form, then came up to Dru's. "He keeps his oath."

"He does," she said with a solemn nod.

Gregory flicked his fiery gaze to Agrat. "By your leave, Your Majesty."

"Go," said Agrat.

Gregory stooped forward and carefully picked Leery up. "Where to?"

"Gehenna," said Agrat. "He has many friends there, and we will see to him."

Gregory nodded his huge head and disappeared in a blink, then reappeared half a

heartbeat later. "His Majesty, the Devil of Light, insisted on taking our wolf friend under his personal care." He turned to Dru. "He invites you to stay with him until Leery has recovered."

Dru nodded. "But first, I have a job to do."

20

Gregory clamped a heavy hand on Agon's shoulder and squeezed until smoke drifted up from his fingers and the dragon winced. "You see?" he rumbled. "You are not safe, even though Her Majesty has left you in my hands. Do not presume I won't hurt you if you anger me."

"Does anyone?" muttered Agon. He cut his gaze to Vinny. "Is this really necessary?"

"Necessary? *Necessary*?" screeched Dru.

"There, there," said Agrat. "Let Gregory do his work, Dizzy."

Gonofrio cleared his throat. "In fact, I do think it's necessary. You showed no compunction for attacking my fellow officers. I

asked Her Majesty to assist us in getting you back to 1PP."

"No, our house," said Dru. "Leery would insist on it, if he were..." She gulped and turned away.

"I'm sorry, but the Two-Seven isn't secure enough for this creature," said Vinny. "We can safeguard ourselves and the public at MCU."

"Fine, but he's mine." Dru's voice was one notch below hostile. "I'll call Van Helsing and tell her." She dropped her head. "And about Leery." She turned and walked out into the hall, pulling out her cell phone.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Agrat turned a withering stare on Agon. "She can call to me at any time, and I *will* come. If she calls me a second time on you, sir, I will use your bones for toothpicks." She narrowed her eyes. "And next time, I may bring my brother and sisters..."

Agon swallowed. "There will be no need for us to meet again."

Agrat leaned closer, a savage smile on her lips. "There'd better not be." She glared at him a moment longer, then turned and nodded at Gregory. "I'll see you in a moment for your report."

"My Queen," said the lava demon. He bowed low. "It has done me good to fight at your side once more."

"And none better to be there," said Agrat with a smile. Her face grew cold as she took one last glance at Agon, then she whirled away, turning to viscous black smoke as she did so. She took a step, and the fabric of reality split in front of her so that her next step took her away.

As the gash floating in the air began to knit, Vinny turned to Gregory. "Shall we?"

"I can take him directly."

"Yes, but without my partner and I, no one will—"

"Fetch her. We shall all go."

Vinny nodded, turning to go, but then he hesitated and turned back. "That was really a sight to see."

"She is most glorious when aroused," said Gregory.

"Yes, but she's the Queen of He—Gehenna, isn't she. I meant how you contributed, how you fed her opportunities. It takes as much skill to do that as to do what she did."

Gregory shifted his gaze from Agon to Vinny. "I am nothing compared to my mistress."

At that moment, Dru stuck her head in. "Lieutenant Van Helsing says not to interrogate him until she arrives."

"She's coming to 1PP?" asked Vinny.

"Yes. Now, let's get a move on. I want to be there when Leery wakes up."

Vinny nodded. "Can you go get Earbes? She's in the—"

Gregory gave him a look as though he were the stupidest creature in any of the nine realms, and an eyeblink later, the two legions of demons, Drusilla bat Agrat, Gonofrio, Agon, and, of course, Gregory stood in the middle of Fifth Avenue. "Where is she?" he rumbled.

"One second," said Vinny, running to a nondescript black van parked around the corner.

21

A hush fell over the Magic Crimes squad room as they appeared, the demons of the Thirteenth and Seventeenth Legions hunched on desks, crowded into corners, crouching atop cabinets—taking almost every open space in the room. Gregory's shoulders pressed against the roof, his head bent forward at a horrible angle, but he kept Agon firmly in his grip.

Sherikins burst out of his office, his face beet red. "What in the name of all that's"—he glanced around at the host of demons—"unholy is all this? Why are there not one, but *two* legions of demons in my squad room?" He looked Gregory up and down. "And who are you?"

"You don't deserve to know my name, ifrit. This one asked for our assistance in transporting your prisoner."

The captain looked from Gregory to Vinny to Agon, finally settling his gaze on Earbes. "This is our perp?"

"And mine," said Van Helsing's disembodied voice. She appeared next to Sherikins. "He's our collar. Two murders, plus he put one of my detectives out of commission."

Captain Sherikins threw his hands up. "Does anyone want to tell me what's going on?"

"We brought him here because it's more secure," said Gonofrio.

Sherikens sucked his teeth. "For who?" He turned, walked into his office, and slammed the door.

"Where do you want him?" asked Gregory. "I grow tired of you."

Dru put her hand on his arm. "Thanks for taking Leery," she said.

"Anything for you, Princess."

Dru glared at Agon. "Remember what my mother said?"

He nodded.

"Then I can take him from here, Gregory." She glanced around at the demons. "Thank you all for coming when I called."

Gregory smiled down at her, and then both he and the two legions of demonic warriors disappeared without so much as a peep.

"Come on," said Gonofrio. "Our interview room is down the hall."

22

Say one thing for Epatha Van Helsing, say she liked to make an appearance. Especially one that might startle someone—she was a ghost, after all. She appeared to the side and slightly behind Agon, so he'd catch movement in the corner of his eye and freak out.

And he didn't disappoint her. Agon lurched sideways, fell to the floor, and screamed, "No! I didn't—"

She didn't expect him to fall out of his chair and cry out, but there was no telling with dragons. They were a weird lot in her experience. "Touch a nerve, did I?" she asked in a sugary-sweet voice.

"By the first egg! I thought..." He shook his head and pressed a hand to his chest. "I thought you were *her.*"

Epatha shrugged and drifted through the table. It was another of her interrogation tricks to keep her subject off balance. "If you'd prefer speaking to her, the princess is in the observation room."

"Not *her*!" snapped Agon. "Her"—he darted his head, shooting terrified looks at the shadows of the room—"royal mother."

"Ah," said Epatha. She turned back to face him and set herself to flickering on a slow pulse, but every tenth beat or so, she staggered the timing. Just a little nudge to keep his mind from latching onto the rhythm. In her day, she'd been one hell of an interrogation artist. "We've never met, the Abbess and me. I do get along with her daughter, though I keep that under the rose. I'm Epatha Van Helsing."

Agon's gaze snapped to hers. "Ah. His second daughter?"

"First."

"Ah," said the dragon again. "David Robert Agon."

"My, my. Ain't you a lively kid?"

His brow furrowed. "Eh?"

"I mean, it's saucy, you vazey ratbag."

Agon frowned and bunched his brows further. "Are you still speaking English?"

"Your *name*, you great trigsy cove. D. R. Agon?" She cracked a smile. "Don't be coy, Mr. Agon."

"Actually, it's *Doctor* Agon. I earned a Ph.D. in gemmology," he said with a sniff, "and I can't help my name."

Epatha scoffed. "You chose it, didn't you? Is it just coincidence? D-R-A-G-O-N?"

"I'd never considered it," he said, but he wouldn't meet her eye.

"No, of course not. And you compounded it with a Ph.D.? Dr. D-R-A-G-O-N?" She rolled her eyes. "That's a bit rum for my tastes."

"I'm not sure we speak the same language."

"Oh, I think you understand me just fine. You lived through the era, after all, and for you, it wasn't so long ago."

Agon tossed his head sideways. "What is this?"

"This is your interrogation," she said, letting her expression harden around a bright smile, flickering faster and faster. "This is where you try to convince me not to have you beaten for what you did to my detectives."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" she asked. "I'd do it myself but for my handicap."

He cocked his head to the side.

Epatha balled her fist and slammed it into the table—or she would have if she'd been

flesh and blood. Instead, her ectoplasmic fist zipped right on through. "You see? Hard to beat someone when you are insubstantial." She glanced at the mirrored glass. "Did you know they possess superhuman strength?"

"What? Who?"

She snapped her gaze back to his and stretched her lips wider than a living creature could, making a parody of a smile that seemed more threat than mirth. "The *Nephilim.*"

Agon glanced at the mirror but said nothing.

"So... Why did you have to come to my locus? Why not stay in Baltimore?"

Agon snorted. "I'd rather leave both loci in smoking ruin in my wake."

"There's a bite of truth," Van Helsing murmured. "Then, why are you here?"

His eyes glowed chartreuse for a moment. "It wasn't my idea. I'm on parole and in the custody of my daughter."

"Poor girl." Epatha leaned forward. "Or is she a serpent, too?"

His eyes narrowed at the term serpent. "She's a *dragon*, insolent wench."

"Oh, there we are. I knew there was still a dragon in there. Now that your mask is off,

maybe we can get on with the details of your confession?"

A knock sounded at the door behind Agon, then it swung open. Gonofrio stood there, a grimace twisting his face. "His magister's here."

Epatha arched his eyebrow. "He asked for a magister?"

"No," said Vinny. "She just showed up."

Van Helsing glanced at Agon, who wore a wide grin on his face. He tipped her a wink and sat back in the chair. "My, but you're a rum buffer to someone. I take it I'm about to meet Magister Agon?"

"Indeed," said the tall, crow-faced woman pushing past Gonofrio. "This interrogation is over."

"It doesn't have to be," said Van Helsing.

"Get out!" snapped the magister.

23

Dru watched through the one-way glass, anger burbling through her like steam through a heating pipe. Her fury beat off her in waves, palpable to those sharing the small, dark room. She didn't realize her feet hung in the air three inches from the floor until she took a step toward the door to the interview room, meaning to explain a thing or two to the bastard dragon and his daughter.

"Hold up," said Earbes, putting her hand on Dru's arm—both to steady her and to slow her roll.

Dru whirled on her, eyes blazing, lips pulled back in a snarl.

"Wait," said Kathandra. "You can't do anything in there but make it worse."

Dru bit back the words she wanted to say—the curse she wanted to hurl—and closed her mouth. She still felt like murder was close at hand, but she *liked* Kathandra, and, well, the woman was right. "I hate that you're right," she murmured.

"Oh, honey," said Kathandra and threw an arm around her shoulders. "Let's get out of here. Vinny can do the paperwork for once. You and I can go grab...some food... Or maybe shopping?"

Shaking her head, Dru closed her eyes. "I need to see Leery."

"Fine, then. I'll take you to the hospital. Where did they take him?"

"Gehenna," muttered Dru.

"Oh, well... I'm not sure the road to Gehenna is in my GPS," said Earbes with a smile.

"I have a portal in my apartment," said Dru in a high-tension-wire voice. "But thanks."

Kathandra smiled her beatific smile. "That's what friends are for. Ride to your apartment, then?"

Dru sighed and nodded. "With the lights."

"And the siren, honey," said Earbes. "Come on, let's blow this pop stand."

"I need to check in with my lieutenant."

"No, you don't," said Van Helsing's disembodied voice. "I'm coming with you."

"To Gehenna, Lieu?" asked Dru.

"That's where he is, isn't it?" Van Helsing materialized near the door. "Come on, you mad blowings, let's get a move on."

24

Earbes pulled the car up next to the liveried doorman. "Ooh-la-la. *Swanky* building, Dru!"

"Thanks," Dru said absently.

The doorman stepped up and opened Dru's door. "Good evening, Miss Nogan," he said.

"Yeah? Fat lot of good you know," said Van Helsing as she stood up without bothering to open her door.

Dru slid out, then turned back. "Thanks, Kathandra, for everything."

"I wish I could do more," she said.

They said goodbye, and Earbes pulled away, blipping her siren to make the swarm of Yellow cabs give her space. Dru turned and led Epatha into the elevator, then through her apartment and to the portal.

"Are you sure, Lieu? Traveling by portal is supposed to be rough on spirits."

"I'm sure," she said. "I want to see Leery, and I want to thank your mother in person."

Dru arched an eyebrow. "Then step this way." She turned and went through the portal. "Mother!" she called on the other side. "We have guests."

Epatha appeared in the portal room, not so much emerging from the portal as hurled from it. She continued to glide forward, her gaze unfocused, mouth hanging slack.

"Lieu, are you okay?" asked Dru.

The ebony door swung open, and Agrat stepped into the room, wearing a loose black silk robe. "Dru-baby, you shouldn't have made her come! Portals are ugly places for a spirit."

"I warned her. And she insisted."

"I'm rum-ti-tum with the chill off," Epatha whispered. "Or will be in a moment. That portal business is a Scotch fiddle that won't quit."

"For you, it must have felt like an eternity," said Agrat. "I'm sorry you had to—"

"No," said Epatha. "Some things should be done in person, and it ain't regular for the one being thanked to do the traveling." She bowed

her head. "Your Majesty, thank you for your actions on behalf of my detectives."

Agrat cocked her head to the side. "How much that must have cost you," she murmured. "But there was no need. Dizzy is my daughter, and Leery is becoming one of the family, considering his oaths regarding my daughter."

"Oaths?" asked Epatha, quirking an eyebrow at Dru.

"He told my father...and my uncle...well, everyone, really, that he'd die to save my life."

Van Helsing's smile grew grim. "Seems he almost did."

"Yes," said Agrat. "And not for the first time. His actions will not be forgotten."

"Even so, Queen Agrat," said Epatha, "I owe you a debt of gratitude, and Van Helsings always pay their debts. If there's something I can—"

"Agrat, dear, did I hear our daughter?" asked Hercule as he stepped into the door frame. He took one look at Epatha and his lip curled. He sniffed to cover it up, but everyone saw it. "I didn't know we were expecting...guests."

"Daddy, this is my boss. Lieutenant Epatha Van Helsing."

"In the flesh, so to speak," he said. "*Est-il sage d'amener ce chasseur à notre maison?*"

"I speak the language, sir," said Epatha in a cold voice. "And I'm no hunter. My *father* was, in darker times. You know, my father the Grand Cynosure."

"Yes." Hercule stood straight, shoulders back. "Forgive me for my ill manners. It's the shock of the day, I'm afraid. Will you take refreshment?"

"*Daddy,*" said Dru.

"*Sang de dieu, je suis stupide aujourd'hui!* Forgive me again, Madame Van Helsing. *Mon Cher ami,* Leery Oriscoe, lies *à la porte de la mort,* and I find I'm not myself. Our house is at your service." He glanced at the portal. "Do you require time to rest after your ordeal?"

"I'd prefer to see Leery, Monsieur Dusang."

"*Mais bien sûr.* A short ride across the valley."

Epatha quirked an eyebrow at Dru. "I assumed he'd be here."

"My *beau-frère* insisted on seeing to his recovery. *S'il vous plait,*" said Hercule, offering his arm.

"Thank you," said Epatha. Briefly, she lay her insubstantial hand on his arm.

"Gregory, the car," said Agrat. "Come, it's this way."

25

Gregory had turned up with a long, sleek limousine, though its engine still howled like tortured demons, and it seemed to handle the rough terrain as easily as any four-wheel-drive monster. He pulled up outside Lucifer's abode and killed the screeching demon under the hood. "My Queen, may I beg a favor?"

Agrat raised an eyebrow at the rearview mirror. "Most unusual, Gregory. But I am intrigued."

"May I be allowed to visit Detective Oriscoe."

"Of course you can," said Dru. "Uncle Luci won't mind."

"And neither do I," said Agrat, a hidden smile twitching her lips, one eyebrow cocked at her daughter, but Dru didn't seem to notice.

She popped her door open and stepped out, then ran to the doors, flung the giant things open, and sprinted into the gloom. "Uncle Luci! Where is he?" She disappeared from the entry hall in mid-stride and reappeared in one of the guest suites—the one with the best view of the Lake of Fire out back. "Oh, thanks, Uncle Luci."

"Quiet, now, Dru-baby," said Lucifer. "Leery needs his rest."

"Mommy, Daddy, Lieutenant Van Helsing, and Gregory are coming, too."

Lucifer cocked his head to the side at the lava demon's name. "Two visits from Gregory in one day," he mused. "Quite the banner day for him."

"I told him you wouldn't mind."

"Gregory's the big lava dude?"

Dru turned to find Angie Carmichael leaning against the doorjamb, dressed in lounge pants and a T-shirt emblazoned with a pink unicorn and a rainbow that read "Satan Is My Sugar Daddy." Dru grinned. "Oh, hello, Angie."

"Hi," she said. "Did I hear you say your mother's coming?"

Dru nodded.

"Then I'd better go change."

"Why?" asked Lucifer. "You look lovely in that."

"Because she's Agrat bat Mahlat."

Lucifer shrugged. "Hi, my name is Lucifer ben Mahlat. It's nice to meet you."

"Smartass," said Angie. She winked at Dru. "I never guessed about his sense of humor."

"Few do," said Dru. "But I mean the signs are all there. I mean, the apple and all that."

"Never really happened," said Lucifer.

"And Faust?" asked Angie with a grin. "I mean, take the guy after a single moment of happiness? That's pretty—"

"I want to see Leery," Dru blurted.

"He's okay, Dru-baby," said Lucifer. "I've taken measures."

"I'll leave you to it," said Angie as she turned and walked down the hall.

"Is he in the bedroom?"

The Father of Lies nodded.

"Snap Mommy and the others in here, okay?"

"I will."

Dru turned and walked to the door, put her hand on the doorknob, then hesitated, her

heart in her throat. "How bad?" she asked without turning.

"Nothing that won't heal, given time and attention," said Lucifer in a soft voice.

"How much?"

"A few weeks. That...*blessing*... Dru-baby, you shouldn't have risked that."

"I had to," she murmured.

"I know. Go on. Go see your wolf."

Dru turned the knob and stepped into the room, taking care to make no sound. She closed the door with hardly a click, then turned toward the bed.

Leery lay on a huge mattress, his body exposed, a few charms and wards hanging above his head, dripping enchantments and raw magic into him at a steady rate. Most of the minor burns had already healed, but the major ones were another story. Her gaze crawled up his body, noting how the large burns on his thighs had a layer of new tissue covering the bone, his forearms had been debrided and luminesced with Lucifer's magic, and the burns across his chest still seemed bad, but the charred mass of flesh was gone. She glanced at his face and found his eyes on

her, and she put on a brave smile. "You're awake," she said in a breathy voice.

He blinked and forced his throat to work, to swallow. "Get him?" he croaked.

Dru nodded. "Don't talk. Let yourself heal. I'll fill you in later."

"Blessing," he whispered.

"Shh," she said. "I did what I had to."

He gave her a long, slow blink.

"The lieu's outside," she said.

Leery arched an eyebrow.

"She insisted. She said she had to come in person. Mommy and Daddy are here, too. And Gregory."

He arched his other eyebrow and gave her another slow blink.

"You nearly..." Dru choked on the words, and her eyes shimmered with tears. "He nearly..."

Leery gave her a single, slow nod. "Not dead yet, Dru-baby."

She smiled through her tears. "I'm going to overlook that one. For services rendered."

Another slow blink.

"Do you have enough energy for all those visitors?"

Leery closed his eyes and sighed.

"Then just rest. I'll get them a meal or something, and we'll see later."

He gave her another slow nod.

"Thank you, Leery," she said in a voice that shook with emotion, "but don't you ever do that again."

He opened his eyes, met her gaze with a forceful one of his own, and shook his head. "I will," he whispered in an iron tone. "Never stop."

Dru closed her eyes, and her tears fell in silence.

26

Lucifer fed them a lavish meal—even providing a dose of undifferentiated ectoplasm to speed Epatha's recovery from the portal—and they made small talk until Leery woke again. Then, the Beast insisted on checking him over before they could visit and made them all promise they'd leave the second he told them to go.

Leery already looked a little better to Dru, and his eyes seemed brighter—though they never seemed to linger on anyone else for more than a moment.

"*Mon Cher ami*," whispered Hercule. "You have but to ask me."

Leery lifted his chin.

"Yes," said Agrat. "We are in your debt, once again. All of us, all of Gehenna, is at your beck and call." Where her voice had been hard and cold—terrifying—when threatening Agon, with Leery it was warm, soft—inviting, even. Her gaze swept over his injuries, and she put an arm around Dru. "In fact, I will extend to you, Lerome Oriscoe, the right to call upon me in times of need, and I shall come, bringing the entire Eighteen Legions with me, if necessary. I will dance for you, Lerome Oriscoe, and spend my wrath upon your enemies and all those who threaten you. This I swear, for now and eternity. You are as a son to me now."

Lucifer nodded. "That goes for me, too. Except for the dancing part." He grinned, but then his expression grew solemn. "Twice you have risked your life for my niece. Twice you have rushed to battle beings of great power to protect our Drusilla. I repaid your first act with

a mere trinket, and that will no longer do. Lerome Oriscoe, I adopt you as my blood. From this day forward, you are under my protection, and my eye is forever upon you. You may call upon me, Lucifer ben Mahlat, at the time of your need, and if it is within my power, I will rain my blessings upon you. I shall watch over you, brother, and take up arms against those who stand against you. You are welcome in my house. You are knight-valiant of my realm, and demons shall do your bidding. Lerome Oriscoe, these things I swear to you."

Leery switched his gaze back and forth between Lucifer and Agrat, and his eyes were wet. "Not...necessary," he whispered.

"Yes, it is," said Agrat. "And more."

Gregory rumbled from behind the others. He'd taken his diminutive form to fit inside the house, but the magma of his true appearance seemed close. "If I may?" he said. When Lucifer waved him forward, he came to stand next to Leery's bed and gazed down at him. "I'm no king. I'm nothing but a soldier, and I have no grave gifts to bestow." He sniffed. "Only my everlasting thanks."

Van Helsing drifted forward to hover next to Dru. "Get yourself well, Leery. We need you

back at the Two-Seven. *Both* of you." She glanced at Dru and gave her a nod. "But if you think you can call on me to bring you coffee or putrid tuna fish sandwiches, you can forget it." She grinned, and Leery returned it, though it appeared to hurt him to do so.

"You already have my thanks," said Dru. "And you already know what I've promised you."

Leery nodded.

"Now, then," said Lucifer. "We've all said our piece, and it's time to let Leery rest and heal. Everyone out."

"Except Dru," croaked Leery.

Lucifer looked down on him. "The first command," he said with a crooked smile. "And so shall it be." He glanced at Dru. "I've already had the room next door prepared for your stay."

Chapter 3

The Court Case

I

Sam McCoy's expression darkened and darkened until it rivaled a Florida thunderstorm. His eyes narrowed to mere slits, his nostrils flared, and his lips all but disappeared, he compressed them so. "You've got a lot of fucking nerve," he grated. The two Agons—father and daughter—sat across from him in the LM's conference room. Angie sat on one side of him, and Epatha Van Helsing blinked like a strobe light on the other. The guards from Rikers stood behind the Agons, expressions impassive.

Brigit Agon sneered back at him. "I could say the same, but it's already well known, so why waste the breath?"

"I wondered the same thing when you requested this meeting. After assaulting three NYPD officers and nearly killing one of them, you can't expect this farce to succeed."

Brigit arched an eyebrow, her expression saying, "Can't I?"

Sam sucked his teeth and shook his head. "If you've got nothing else?"

"Well, actually, I do," said the magister with a grin. She reached into her valise and withdrew a blueback. "Here's my motion to dismiss."

"Why not?" asked Sam. "Since the whole point of this meeting seems to be to show how far from reality your perception has drifted."

Angie snatched the blueback and scanned it. She chuckled. "First time in criminal court, is it? Don't worry, Sam. I can crush this motion in about twelve seconds."

Brigit glowered at her.

"I have no doubt, Angie," said Sam. He turned his attention to the elder dragon. "Dr. Agon, surely you recognize this as whimsy. You've been in the system. You know you have the right to a *criminal* defense magister. I can assure you, your daughter is mishandling this case, and you'd be much better off with someone from the Supernatural Defender's office."

"The last time my father listened to such advice, he ended up with a twenty-five-year sentence for burglary and robbery in Baltimore."

"Fine. Forgo the Supernatural Defender's office. Pick any of the fine magisters this locus has to offer. Sit second chair, Ms. Agon, if you want, but don't take this forward on your own. I'll run circles around you."

She treated him to a sickly-sweet, albeit fake smile, and said, "Mr. McCoy, have you forgotten I'm a dragon? I have no need to run. I swoop in from above, talons out."

"Good for you. Your father won't have air under his wings for a long time unless he listens to good advice when it's offered." McCoy threw up his hands. "But fine, have it your way. Just don't come crying to me when he's convicted and sent away for hundreds of years."

Dr. Agon winced at that, but Brigit lay a hand on his forearm. "All talk, Daddy," she murmured. "Let me handle this."

The elder Agon gave a slow nod and stood. "You've heard my daughter's offer," he said. "Contact us if you want to avoid the civil suit."

McCoy chuckled and watched them file out of the conference room after putting Dr. Agon back in his enchanted restraints.

"She can't be serious," said Angie.

"Oh, I think she is. But she's woefully unprepared for what's to come."

"Not to mention naïve," said Van Helsing. "But this stunt will make the papers. It will sow the seed of doubt in the jury pool."

"Not when I get their civil suit dispensed with," said Angie. "Which I expect to do within a few minutes in front of Judge Le Fay."

"Let's get him arraigned before you're due in her court."

"I can do it this afternoon," said Angie.

"Good. No bail."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

2

Judge Edgar Cayce slipped through the door to his chambers and floated up to the bench. He sat, sinking into the chair a tad, and glared at his gavel. He reached for it but could do no more than rattle it in its holder. "Bloody thing," he muttered. "Bang! I call this proceeding to order despite this blooming piece of cack." He met Angie's gaze and tipped

her a wink. "Ms. Carmichael. What do you have for me this afternoon?"

"The arraignment of one David Robert Agon, Your Honor."

"And the charges?"

"Three counts of aggravated battery on a law enforcement officer, attempted murder of a law enforcement officer, two counts magical murder during the course of a felony, to wit: robbery."

"Then light on bail?" asked Cayce with a grin.

"Sure—as long as you mean none."

"Bring in the accused," Judge Cayce said with a grin at Angie.

As Agon was brought in, his daughter swept in from the hall and approached the bar. "Your Honor," she said, raising her hand.

"Yes?"

"Brigit Agon for the defense."

"Noted."

She walked up beside her father and patted him on the shoulder, then grimaced at his restraints. "Surely there is no reason to embarrass my client this way."

"Two dead jewelers at the Diamond Exchange might beg to differ, and I'm sure the

detectives from the Supernatural Inquisitors Squad would. Especially Detective Sergeant Leery Oriscoe, who is still battling for his life after arresting your father," said Angie.

"The werewolf? *He* attacked my client, Your Honor, not the other way around. It's all spelled out in the civil suit I filed on behalf of my client this morning. I've also filed my motion to dismiss—"

"I've read your brief, madam, and find it lacking," said Cayce, arching a translucent eyebrow.

"No hearing on the matter?" Brigit asked.

"You've just had it," said Angie with a snarky grin.

"But I—"

"Motions on bail?" asked Cayce.

"The People ask for remand, Your Honor," said Angie.

"Remand? Are you serious?" snapped Brigit. "For stealing a gem? For a *dragon taking back his gems*?"

"No," said Angie, her tone brimming with sarcasm. "For trying to murder one of the most decorated officers the Supernatural Inquisitors Squad has on offer. And for

magical murder of the two jewelers I mentioned earlier."

"Second-degree murders. *Attempted* murder. Neither of those charges warrant—"

"Perhaps you missed the full intent of the charge magical murder during the commission of a felony? Attempted murder of a *law enforcement officer*?" asked Cayce. "Those little details tacked on the end elevate the charges to murder in the first."

Brigit glared at Angie. "But my father is an upstanding—"

"Hardly," scoffed Angie.

"—member of our community. He has the means to put up a *substantial* bail."

"You are aware you can't use the proceeds of a felony as bail money, aren't you?" said Angie.

"We're *dragons*, Your Honor. We have means."

Cayce looked at Angie. "What do you say, Ms. Carmichael."

"There's no amount of money that can assure the accused will show up for trial. He's violated his parole in Baltimore and will face further time there. His crimes are aggravated and egregious in nature. He shows no

hesitation at committing acts of violence against fellow supernaturals or mundanes; no compunction against destroying property. In fact, had one of the officers involved in the arrest not had...other resources to call on, it's likely the accused would have escaped arrest. The People maintain that remand is the most appropriate course."

Cayce glanced at Agon. "Ms. Agon?"

"Would forty million in gold and gems assuage the People?"

Cayce arched both eyebrows.

"My client will be happy to stay with his hoard and will wear any enchantment the People require to maintain his location."

"Your Honor, this generosity makes me wonder *why* it is so important for the accused to have bail."

"Confinement in a dungeon is cruel and unusual punishment for dragons, Your Honor, who need the sky, the air, and suffer when access is denied," said Agon.

"That seems reasonable..." said Cayce.

"Your Honor, the People—"

"It's *forty million dollars*, Ms. Carmichael." Cayce shrugged. "And the accused will wear an enchanted location tracker."

"I want assurances, Your Honor," said Angie.

"Then make sure whoever does the enchantment is up to the task, Ms. Carmichael." Cayce glared at his gavel, then huffed a sigh. "Bang! So ordered."

3

McCoy pinched the bridge of his nose, then shook his head. "I can't believe it." He dropped his hand to the desk and glared at Angie. "How could you let this happen?"

"*Let* it happen, Sam? I fought it tooth and nail. Cayce was swayed by the big number."

"This is a certified *disaster*. Agon is a danger to everyone. He's callous, he feels entitled, he's—"

"You don't have to convince me. I'm on your side. I asked for assurances, and Cayce said we should make sure the enchanter is up to the task."

Sam quirked an eyebrow. "Have anyone in mind?"

"No."

"Say someone with a lot of experience? An older gentleman?"

"I'm not going to infringe on my personal relationships for this office, Sam," Angie said in a cold tone.

"Then we'll have to bet on the Department of Corrections." He sighed and put his head in his hands. "I don't want him getting away, Angie."

"I'll put in a call." She turned toward the door.

"Let me know what you find out. I can check out whoever they assign, and if he's not up to snuff, maybe Adam can pull a string or two with Cynosure Endymion."

4

Angie poked her head through the door and grinned. "I'd ask if you are decent, but experience tells me you never are." She stepped into the room and approached the bed.

Leery sat propped in the bed. Dru sat at his side, holding a milkshake with a long straw.

"A milkshake, Oriscoe?" asked Angie.

"Well, it *is* coffee flavored," said Dru.

Leery twitched a lopsided smile but flinched as he did so. "Ouch."

"How are you doing, you old dog?" Angie asked.

"Better," said Leery, and his voice did sound much improved. His wounds still looked horrendous, however. "What's wrong?"

Angie cocked her head. "Why do you think something's wrong?"

"That look in your eye?"

"What look? I don't have any look."

"Yeah, you do. You get it when you want to murder someone."

"Well, maybe I do have a look, then." She puffed her cheeks out. "He got bail. I can't believe Cayce fell for it, but he did."

"Bail?" asked Dru, a dangerous note in her voice.

"Restricted to Manhattan, an enchanted locator to verify his location."

Leery shrugged, then winced.

"You're going to have to try and stop that," said Dru.

"Yes, Dru-baby," Leery said with a smirk.

"Don't think I won't kick your ass, hurt or not, Old Spice."

Angie's gaze bounced back and forth between them as they grinned at each other. "You aren't upset?"

"Nah. Expect the worst and you'll never be disappointed." Leery jerked his chin at Dru, and she put the straw in his mouth.

"What did he put up?" asked Dru.

"Forty million in gems and gold."

"From his hoard?"

"His daughter's, most likely. She's representing him, too."

"Who's going to do the enchantment?" asked Lucifer from the doorway.

Angie spun around. "Luci! Didn't your mother teach you not to sneak up on people?"

The Lord of Lies smiled. "The opposite, actually. Who's doing it?"

Angie shrugged. "I don't know yet. We've got a call into the—"

"Nonsense," he said. "I'll do a better job."

"I can't ask you to—"

"You didn't, but you certainly could." He came into the room and bent down to kiss her cheek. "Anyway, it's in Leery's best interest that we know where that prick with wings is."

"Can you do that? Know from here, I mean?" asked Leery.

"Well, I am the Devil, after all." Luci grinned at him. "How's the shake?"

"Cold," said Leery, "but delicious."

"Good. Comfortable?"

"As much as I can be."

Lucifer nodded. "Let's go, Angela."

"Now?"

"I don't want some ham-fisted public servant screwing it up." His gaze bounced to each of them. "Uh, not that all public servants are—"

"Don't even try to walk it back," said Dru in a mild voice.

"Yeah, you can't unsay it," said Angie, grinning at Dru.

"Fine. What's it going to cost me?" A smile danced in Lucifer's eyes, but he kept it off his lips.

"We'll think about it," said Dru. "But until we come up with something... P's and Q's, Uncle Luci."

"Right. Well, let's start with a strong enchantment tethered to the soul of an obnoxious asshole dragon."

Dru shrugged. "It's a start."

5

The guards stumbled back as a grim-faced Halsey led the Prince of Power into the processing room below Rikers Island. Agon was seated at a metal table off to one side, and when Lucifer laid eyes on him, the Dark Lord's skin shifted to matte black, and he grew a foot in half a second. The air around him began to smoke and hiss. Spikes sprang from his skin at his joints and curled horns

crowned his head. The air filled with the scent of burnt feathers as his blackened wings sprouted from his shoulders.

By the time Angie could lay a hand on his forearm, he'd grown two more feet, and his horns brushed the stone roof. "Calm, Luci."

Agon turned at the sound of her voice, and seeing the Beast, he paled to the point Angie thought he might pass out from lack of blood to his brain. "I've done nothing!"

"*Nothing*, is it?" growled Lucifer. "I've a mind to skip the enchantment and rend you limb from limb, instead."

Agon shrank back. "*He's* doing the enchantment?"

"I'm duty-bound to protect my brother and my niece."

"Your brother?"

"You set him alight. You battered at him." Lucifer lowered his head to glower at the dragon from beneath his brows. "My sister taught you something, but is it enough?" he mused. "*Not for me*!"

"He'll pay for all of it, Luci," said Angie. "Let's just do what we came to do."

He shrugged and strode toward Agon. "Do you know you're not the first dragon to offend me?"

"I—" began Agon.

"It's true. I turned the other one to gold and sit on him when I take the throne." Satan's horns struck sparks from the roof as he moved, and his muscles thickened with each step he took toward the prisoner. "Now, *that* was a fitting punishment for one of your kind—for one who loves gold so much as to try to steal from me. He never sees the sky. He never moves, never unfurls his wings." He leaned closer, crowding Agon. "And he only tried to steal money. Imagine what I will do to you if you ever try to harm my family again."

Agon turned his face away.

"This is unacceptable!" snapped Brigit Agon from the doorway. "You may not threaten a prisoner in your care!"

Lucifer grinned, exposing his fangs. "He's not my prisoner. I'm doing the locus a favor."

"I'll add you to the lawsuit, then," Brigit sneered.

The Imp's grin widened, showing more flashing teeth, and it kept widening until his

smile seemed to bisect his head. "Do that. I look forward to adding your name to the list."

"The... The list?" asked the magister with a panicky expression.

"Oh, yes. The list. Those souls who I've marked for special attention. Those souls, who by their own folly, have earned a place in the Lake of Torment. Those arrogant fools who've enriched me by bringing specious lawsuits against me." He leaned toward her as though to whisper in her ear, and she shrank back. "I *always* win my countersuits."

Angie flashed a cold smile at her. "Now, if you're done threatening the Lord of Dragons, do you want your father out of here or are you refusing Judge Cayce's terms? Please say you are."

"No." Brigit shook her head. "No. Get on with it."

Lucifer's eyes narrowed, but if anything, his gruesome grin stretched even wider. "Thank you so much for your cooperation, Brigit Agon of West 88th Street."

She swallowed hard and kept her mouth shut.

"Put out your hand!" Luci roared at Dr. Agon, making everyone in the room jump, even

Angie. The roar echoed off into the dungeon proper, and suddenly, the entire facility went silent—just as the veldt would after a lion roared at his prey.

Agon lifted his arm, hand shaking, and squeezed his eyes shut. Lucifer grabbed his wrist—none too gently—and pulled out a silver ingot. He looked at the metal, and it began to melt and boil, gray smoke twirled away by the dungeon's ventilation system.

"Hey! You're not going—" began Brigit.

Satan, laughing, spread his wings. "Oh, Lord, yeah. I *am*." He slapped the hissing, sputtering metal around Agon's wrist, and the dragon hissed with pain. The Dark Lord jerked the dragon close, looming over him like thunderclouds threatening destruction from above. He began to sing in a basso voice, using the *Lingua Tenebris Lacuna* to weave an enchantment that everyone in the room could feel burgeoning in the air until it seemed there was no air left to breathe. Agon's face first crumpled, then twisted with pain and fear, then slackened as though his life were draining away.

And still, the song went on.

Agon's hand began to quake in Lucifer's death-grip grasp, the creaking of the dragon's wrist bones audible as a percussion to the dark lyrics. He jerked his hand once, and his eyes rolled up in his head. Then his feet began to beat a staccato rhythm on the stone floor, and his shoulders began to shake. His jaw snapped open, and a shriek echoed across the chamber. He jerked his arm to and fro, side to side, but he couldn't escape Lucifer's fist.

Through it all, the Prince of Pain's gaze crawled over Agon's face, drinking in his pain, lapping at his fear, his lips curled back into that hideous, soul-eating grin.

"That's enough!" snapped Brigit. She rushed forward, but Lucifer sent a brutal glance her direction and she froze—a deer in the headlights of a convoy of monstrous trucks.

And still, the song went on and on.

It curled around them, swirled up their noses, twisted in their ears, looping back on itself like the ouroboros, stitching things together in their minds—fear and sex, pain and pleasure, love and hate—stitching them up; ripping them apart.

Agon screamed and it was a heart-stopping sound.

Grinning, Lucifer sang on.

6

Sam hung up the phone and sucked his teeth. He didn't look at either of them, though. He licked his lips and opened his mouth, then closed it again. He pushed his chair away from his desk, pinched the bridge of his nose, spun his chair around, and gazed out his window.

"Sam—" began Angie.

"Do you know who that was?"

"No."

"Locus Cynosure Endymion." He spun to face them.

"And how is my old moon-loving friend?" asked Lucifer.

"In a word, Your Majesty? Pissed."

Lucifer shrugged, a loose smile on his lips, not a single ginger hair out of place. "I'll speak with him and all will be well."

"What went on in there? What were you thinking?" The last he directed at Angie.

"I was thinking my boyfriend was a prince for offering to solve our problem. I was thinking that maybe my boss would be appreciative—*for once*—of my extra effort."

"What went on was that I laid an enchantment on Agon—as asked," said Lucifer, a hint of smoke curling from his nose as he looked at Angie. "It's an enchantment of great power. The dragon is trapped in his human shape. In addition, I will know where he is at any moment, and the police will have access to the same tracker. Also, he can no longer access his own magic, neither by spoken word nor thought."

"And the screaming, Your Majesty?" demanded Sam.

"That was just pleasure," said Lucifer, meeting Sam's gaze without flinching. "And his terror. And the magic cementing him in his human form."

"Well, his daughter has added to her civil suit! Torture, she alleges! Torture!"

"Hardly that," said Lucifer. "And surely, I would know." He cocked his head at McCoy.

"Frankly, Mr. McCoy, your attitude begins to rankle. Have I broken any laws?"

Sam snapped his head around. "Have you?"

Lucifer smiled. "No, and again, I would know if anyone would."

McCoy shook his head.

"The enchantment is laid. I have done what was necessary to ensure Agon pays for what he did to Leery. For what he attempted to do to my niece."

Again, Sam only shook his head.

"There was no other way, Mr. McCoy. Any weaker measures would have been vulnerable to his own magic. Truly, there are few entities who can match that enchantment, and the dragon and his child probably don't fall in that category. He is here in Manhattan, on the Upper West Side, and he will remain here. I have made sure of it. The rest is up to you."

Sam took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. "I appreciate your efforts." He glanced at Angie. "On both of your parts. I don't mean to seem ungrateful." He hunched forward, arms on his desk. "I'm worried, though, that in ensuring your enchantment is strong enough, that you've given Brigit Agon

ammunition to cause more trouble—both in the courtroom and in the press."

"Then I will take care of that," said Lucifer. "My attorneys will chair the civil suit, and they are demons of the highest caliber. If Agon makes a stink in the press, I have ways of sucking the juice out of it." He smiled, and goosebumps erupted down Sam's back. "You may trust me on it."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Sam. "But I can handle the suit and the press."

"You're sure?"

Sam nodded.

"Well, you can call me if you need help," said Lucifer as he got to his feet. He held out his hand, and Angie placed hers in it, allowing him to help her up. "Until then, Mr. McCoy."

"Don't forget, Angie. Judge Le Fay, tomorrow at nine."

"I never do," Angie said over her shoulder. "Night, Sam."

"Goodnight," he said and turned back to his window.

7

At nine the next morning, Angie and Sam sat at the prosecution table in Judge Morgana Le Fay's courtroom in silence. Neither had said much to the other as they climbed the steps and entered the courtroom.

Brigit Agon sat at the defense table, and it seemed an evening stewing about Lucifer's enchantment hadn't calmed her any. Every few seconds she sent daggers of hate across the aisle at Angie.

Arthur Pendragon floated into the room, armor shining too bright in the morning sun that shone outside the building, blond hair perfect as always, the massive stone set in Excalibur's hilt winking and flashing at all and sundry as if it were the eye of some invisible beast. "All rise!" he said in a voice used to command.

Morgana Le Fay floated into the courtroom and ascended to the bench. She waved a languid hand at her gavel and smiled at it when it rose gracefully, then smashed into the

sound block. "I call you to order," she said in her sweet, melodious voice and winked at Arthur. "As I understand it, we are here today to hear arguments regarding a civil suit filed against the Locus of New York?"

Sam stood and smiled at Judge Le Fay. "Yes, Your Honor."

Le Fay cocked her head to the side and flashed a one-sided smile. "Most unusual, Mr. McCoy."

"It's an unusual circumstance, Your Honor."

"And Ms. Agon, I believe?"

Brigit stood and smoothed her dark blue skirt. "Yes, Your Honor."

"I've not seen you in the Criminal Part before."

"No, Your Honor. My practice is focused on contract law."

Morgana frowned. "A murder case is hardly the right venue to try out criminal law."

"Be that as it may, Your Honor, I represent Dr. Agon in these matters."

"Both the civil and criminal cases?"

"Yes, Your Honor," said Brigit.

Judge Le Fay turned her gaze on Dr. Agon and studied him a moment. "I assume the

identical last names convey some family connection?"

"Yes," answered Brigit. "Dr. Agon is my father."

"I see," said Le Fay without breaking her gaze away from Dr. Agon. "Sir, I'd strongly recommend you consider hiring a criminal defense magister. The locus will provide one—"

"No, thank you, Your Honor," said Agon with a slight inclination of his head. "My daughter will do fine."

"It is your decision," said Morgana. "Though I will cut you no leeway due to her inexperience. She will have to sink or swim."

Agon nodded.

"Now, then," said the judge. "Someone explain the reason I'm hearing motions about a civil case in the Criminal Part."

Sam nodded. "It is unusual, Your Honor, but merited."

"I'll decide on that matter, if you please, Mr. McCoy."

"Yes, Judge," said Sam. "The People have indicted Dr. Agon on several serious charges, including attempted murder of a law enforcement officer and two murders. Ms. Agon has filed a civil suit against the locus, the

NYPD, and certain members of Gehenna's royal family."

Morgana arched an eyebrow.

"It is the feeling of the People that these cases are filed specifically to poison the potential jury pool, to garner press attention, and to paint Dr. Agon as the victim in this foul mess."

"Is this true, Ms. Agon?"

Brigit shook her head. "No, Judge Le Fay. Far from it. In fact, the motion before the Court is a prime example of the egregious behavior undertaken by—"

"Yes, yes," said Morgana in an annoyed tone. "There are no cameras here, Ms. Agon."

Sam suppressed a small smile.

"What would you have me do, Mr. Prosecutor? I'll not muck about in the Civil Part, so if you're here to ask for a dismissal..."

"No, Your Honor," said Sam. "The defendant should have recourse if his rights have been violated."

"Then, what?"

"Your Honor, just as the defendant should have his day in civil court without interference from the Criminal Part, the People should have

their day in criminal court without interference from the Civil Part."

Le Fay nodded. "It stands to reason."

"And the criminal charges against Dr. Agon should take precedence over his civil suit. We're talking about murder here, Your Honor."

"I am aware, Mr. McCoy," said Morgana with an amused twist to her lips. "May I remind you, also, that there are no cameras in the courtroom?"

"Thank you, Your Honor," said Sam. "I get carried away at times."

"Zeal for the prosecution of your cases is not a negative trait, Mr. McCoy. Go on."

"If we allow both cases to proceed in parallel, Judge, it may present undue advantage to either, or both, parties. For example, since I'm a named participant in the civil case, Ms. Agon may subpoena me to give a deposition and may ask any sort of question she likes—including a fishing expedition into our trial strategy."

Le Fay nodded.

"And at the same time, it could be alleged I am using this criminal proceeding to exert undue influence on Dr. Agon to drop his civil case."

"Yes, I see your point." Le Fay steepled her fingers. "And I can see statements and details about the civil suit worming their way into the media."

"I would never—" began Brigit, her face clouding over with anger.

"Civil filings are a matter of public record, Ms. Agon. That was my only meaning." Morgana turned back to Sam. "What is the solution, Mr. McCoy?"

"Your Honor, the People seek an injunction staying the civil proceeding until such a time as the Criminal Part is done with Dr. Agon. Further, we request a gag order for all parties related to the civil suit through the remainder of the criminal trial."

"Hmm." Morgana turned to the defense. "Ms. Agon? What about it?"

Brigit shook her head. "I have a right—no, a *duty*—to represent my client just as zealously as Mr. McCoy persecutes him."

"The word you're looking for is *prosecute*, Ms. Agon."

"I chose the word I meant, Your Honor."

"I see. May I assume you'd fight any such injunctions as Mr. McCoy has suggested?"

"Tooth and claw," said Ms. Agon vehemently.

"One wonders," said Le Fay in a mild tone, "why that is, given Mr. McCoy's stance on your client's right to his civil proceeding." She hummed an airy little tune for a moment while her gaze traveled the high places in the courtroom. "One wonders if your zealous representation of your client includes the very things Mr. McCoy is worried about?"

Brigit opened her mouth, but Morgana held up a hand to stop her speaking.

"I have to tell you, Ms. Agon. I'm leaning toward granting Mr. McCoy's reasonable requests. Have you any legal argument to present? Any applicable case law as to why I should not?"

Brigit's face settled into a grimace, and she shook her head.

"Very well. There are a few things I'd like to consider before I rule. Court is dismissed."

8

Sam and Angie rode the elevator toward their floor. They rode in silence, though Sam glanced at her and pursed his lips several times during the ride. As the elevator disgorged them, he put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her aside. "This is silly," he said.

"Is it, Sam?" asked Angie.

"Not what you said. This whole not talking to each other thing. We're bigger people than that."

Angie shrugged.

"I'm sorry if it appears that I don't appreciate what you do when I'm angry. I say things." Sam shrugged. "Things like: 'How could you' and 'What were you thinking.' Boneheaded things like that."

Angie nodded, though there was a hint of a smile on her lips. "You do say things like that."

"But I don't *mean* that." He looked around. "Have I ever told you about my old man?"

"Your father? No."

"He was a Warder in the Thirty-Third Precinct. Tough son of a bitch with a rigid view of the world."

"Ah," she said.

"When he got angry, it was always 'How could you do that, Sam?' or 'What were you thinking, Sam?'"

"Sounds like a real jerk," said Angie, and this time, she smiled.

"Yes," said Sam. "He was that and more. But it was how I was raised. I've tried for years to quash that side of me, and most of the time, I do."

"But not all of the time."

"You'd know better than anyone."

"Anyone besides your ex-girlfriends."

Sam smiled. "Right."

"So, is this an apology?"

Sam nodded, looking her in the eye. "It is."

"Then I accept," said Angie.

"Good. I will endeavor not to repeat my mistakes, and I hope you will endeavor to overlook them as I make them."

"It helps to know where you are coming from."

"Good. I'm an old grouch, and sometimes I lash out, but I never forget who my friends are."

Angie turned toward the office. "So, how do you think it went back there?"

"Anytime the judge wants to go away and research something, I get a nervous stomach, but overall, I think it went well."

"Agon sort of played right into your hands there."

"Sort of." Sam pursed his lips. "But still, though I think the argument was made, let's get to work figuring out an argument to whatever objections Judge Le Fay may come up with."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Angie asked.

"By coming up with an argument for everything."

"Oh. Business as usual, then?"

Sam smiled. "You got it." His smile faded. "In the meantime, there's something I've got to do."

Angie flashed a sardonic smile his way. "He'll be glad to see you."

9

Sam took a public portal to Gehenna, and the experience wasn't one he wanted to repeat all that often. The portal itself wasn't all that bad, but the Portal Authority on the Gehenna side fell to utter silence as he materialized. Demons of all sizes, colors, and ranks stood gaping at him, and the few humans in the mix did everything in their power to avoid meeting his gaze.

He turned to the attendant. "I need transportation to the palace."

The gray-skinned man behind the counter looked at him and sniffed, his lips twisted into a moue of disdain. "Do I look like I run a taxi stand?"

Sam turned his icy gaze on the little man and frowned. "It's a matter of importance, and His Excellency is expecting me."

"Oh, I doubt that very much, *magister*." The little man spat the last word—an epithet if Sam had ever heard one.

"Doubt away. I'll be sure to tell him that..." Sam squinted at the gray man's uniform. "Thuklisthuth, is it?"

Thuklisthuth sneered and clacked a few keys on his keyboard. "There. Happy? Wait outside, human."

Sam nodded once, then turned and walked out the door. He stood there, gazing around at the arid greenery. The molten bronze sky gleamed, a sun of titanic proportions looming overhead like the fist of some great bully. In the distance, something screeched like a cat in pain, and it seemed to be getting closer.

Demons thronged across the landscape, crowding each other—shoving, snapping their teeth at one another—but Sam stood amidst an empty space wide enough for a football team.

The shrieking cat sound grew closer and closer, and when Sam looked in that direction, a plume of blood-colored dust hung in the air. The howling grew louder and louder until Sam wanted to slap his hands over his ears. A splash of yellow danced in the distance, zigging and zagging from right to left, avoiding knots of demons intent on their dance or walk or whatever the hell they were doing, avoiding

boulders and plants. Fascinated, Sam watched the yellow blob come on, the shrieks and wails coinciding with abrupt changes in direction. As the blob grew closer and closer, Sam decided it was a vehicle of some kind, and a few seconds later, he learned it was a cab.

The cab roared straight at him, neither slowing nor trying to avoid running down one of the nameless imps that filled the floor of the valley as they leaped out of its way. It slid to a stop, kicking up more blood-red dust. Sam stood gawking at the cab—which looked more like a squat, ugly creature than a car.

"You call a cab, meater?" asked the strange, multilimbed driver with eyes encircling his head. The color of his carapace matched the exterior of the car exactly.

Sam nodded.

"Well, get in. The meter's running."

Sam slid into the back seat. "I'm not sure what currency you—"

The driver glared at him from his rear-facing eyes. "Tourist?" he rasped. His misshapen head bobbed as if to some unheard music, and his long gray-green tongue whipped out to slaver something that looked like melted margarine on his beak and cheeks. "I know all

the good spots. You want a succubus? I know some. Incubus? Same. Name your pleasure, I've got your measure."

"Um, no," said Sam. "His Majesty's palace, please."

The ugly creature threw back his head and roared laughter, slapping various parts of his body with various hands. "Oh, that's a good one." He wiped a bloody tear from his cheek. "But, really. Sex? Booze? Drugs? Oh! I know!" he snapped the fingers of three hands—*pop-pop-pop.* "*Murder?*"

"No. His Majesty's palace."

"Uh..." The driver hunched forward, then twisted his carapace. "His Majesty doesn't see just anyone. You know? He's, like, *famous.* There are protocols."

"I'm expected," Sam lied.

"No. No, you're not, meater. If you were, I wouldn't be here. He'd have sent a car."

"Are you going to take me there or not?" A dangerous-sounding edge laced Sam's voice. "I've no time for this!"

"And just how do you expect to pay me, meater?"

"Whatever the currency is, I'll—"

"Ha! Currency!" The frenetic driver rolled down his window with one arm, hawked, and spat out the window. "This economy runs on one thing, and one thing only."

"And what's that?"

The yellow creature went still, then turned to smile at Sam over the seatback, three of his arms hanging over into the back seat, most of his eyes focused on Sam. "Souls, meater. Souls." He winked at Sam. "But it looks like you're still using yours."

Sam nodded. "I am."

"Then, how shall you pay me?"

"What do you suggest?"

A calculating look shone in the creature's eye. "A promissory note against the day you leave your mortal coil. On that day, you promise me one-fifth of your soul."

Sam laughed. "One-fifth of my eternal soul for a ride across the valley? Hardly."

"You are welcome to walk," said the creature.

Neither of them had noticed, but the constantly milling demons outside the vehicle had all frozen in place, gazing up the valley with terror writ on their faces. One by one, they fell to their knees, heads bowed.

"What are they doing?" Sam asked, pointing.

"The Dance," said the driver with a shrug. "We all have to spend a portion of our day—"

"Not that. *That.*" He pointed again, and the driver turned.

He gasped and covered his mouth. Sam followed his gaze. Something black and sleek raced toward them, something mainly matte black but with bits that reflected the sun, winking at them like a whore on the strut.

"Get out!" screamed the driver. "Get out, meater! *Get out!*"

"What's going on?"

The yellow vehicle lurched a few feet forward with an evil hiss, then braked suddenly, hurling Sam against the seatback. "Get out! I'm leaving! Get out!" The driver turned, and with one hand, he opened the door, shoving at Sam with the other five arms. "*Get out or you're going with me!*"

"What's—" Sam squawked as he fell out of the cab, landing on his backside in the red dust.

The cab lurched away, whatever serving it for an engine raising such a cacophony of screeching shrieks that Sam thought he might

go deaf. Dust flew from the vehicle's tires as it slewed around in a big, sloppy circle, then accelerated away. Sam caught the driver's expression as he passed—one of outright terror.

Thunder rumbled above his head, and Sam looked up, expecting a cloudy sky, but there was none. Brilliant orange flared in the tail of his eye, and Sam glanced over his shoulder. Several hundred yards distant, the yellow cab sat smoking, roof glowing orange, the driver wailing and scrabbling at the door handle.

"Mr. McCoy," said a basso voice. "I'm so sorry not to be here to meet you. I wasn't aware you were coming so soon."

Sam turned back and saw a large, cream-colored hand extended to help him up. He took it and was lifted out of the dust as though he weighed no more than an infant. Lucifer stood beaming down at him. The demons who'd been dancing or exercising around him lay flat out on the ground, faces turned down so their noses rested in the dust. "I apologize for that oaf," he said. "I'll deal with him later."

Behind them, the driver of the cab wailed, and Lucifer lifted his gaze from Sam's face. The

cabbie's wail cut off with a choking sound. "Beelzebub?" he said.

A flash of matte black and gleaming silver blurred by, too fast for Sam to get any detail, hurling demons hither and yon with abandon. He turned his head just in time to see that black blur slam into the yellow vehicle, the cabbie's eyes gone wide, wide, wide.

"Now, Mr. McCoy," said Lucifer. "Please allow me to give you a ride back to my house in comfort. No promissory notes required." As he uttered the last phrase, he lifted his gaze from Sam's face once more, and once more, the cabbie shrieked in terror. There was a thudding noise, and the screaming stopped.

Sam began to turn his head, but Lucifer put a single finger against his cheek. "There's nothing to see," he said. "Just an internal matter."

"Uh... He really didn't do—"

"An internal matter," Lucifer repeated. "Come, my car is right over here."

"Um...okay," said Sam. "I hope you're not too hard on him, though."

"He's a bug," said the Prince of Power. "He's broken the rules before, and I'll hazard a guess, he'll do it again. No one in Gehenna

barters for souls." He glanced down at Sam, his expression cold and hard. "No one."

"Of course not," said Sam.

Lucifer led him to a thick-skinned SUV with enormous balloon tires that could have contained Sam's entire apartment with room for a hot tub—or so it seemed to Sam. Another matte black humanoid stood near the rear door of the giant SUV, and as they approached, he opened it and bowed low. He was dressed as a chauffeur, complete with the little hat. The holes in the hat for his horns made the whole thing seem silly. "Thank you, Verrier," said Lucifer as he ushered Sam into the back.

Lucifer climbed in behind him, shrinking to make it easier to fit. Verrier closed the door behind them, and as soon as it clunked shut, the outside sound died completely. Sam glanced out the window, and his gaze found the yellow cab.

The matte black demon Lucifer had called Beelzebub stood with his muscular back to them, his great, leathery wings spread, his body-builder's arms extended to the hilt of a giant obsidian sword that he'd used to pin the yellow cab *and* its driver to the red earth. Sam

frowned at the scene, and the cabbie's eyes found his, a look of supreme pain and terror carried in them.

"Show him mercy, Your Majesty," said Sam. "He did me no lasting harm."

"I will take that into account at his sentencing," said Lucifer. "In the meantime, let's speak of more pleasant things. I was delighted when Angie called to tell me you were on your way."

"Thank you." Sam cleared his throat. "I owe you an apology, and it seemed fitting that I come to you. I behaved badly, and I'm sorry for how I treated you."

"Oh, it's already forgotten, Mr. McCoy. We—"

"Sam, please," said Sam.

"Then you must call me Luci. All my friends do." He grinned at Sam. "We all have moments when we react poorly, Sam. Surprise, frustration, anger—these emotions rarely bring out the best in us, do they?"

"No," said Sam. "They don't. Thank you for being so gracious."

"It's nothing—as I said." He glanced out the window. "Ah! Here we are."

Sam glanced out the window, surprised to find they'd climbed the hill and stood outside Lucifer's front doors. "I never felt it move!"

"Yes," said Lucifer with a smile. "Verrier's the very best there is." The door opened, and again, Verrier bowed low. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"No, thank you," said Sam. "It's late morning, my time. I make it a point never to drink with the Sovereign of Gehenna before lunch."

Satan chuckled. "Lunch, then." He glanced at Verrier, and despite the demon having his face averted, he nodded.

"I'd like to see Leery Oriscoe, if I may."

"Of course," said Lucifer. "Come. His suite is this way." He led Sam through a maze of shadowed, silky black corridors until they emerged into red-tiled sandstone corridors dotted with oaken doors.

"Beautiful," said Sam.

"Thank you. The exterior must follow certain forms, along with the corridors up to the throne room, but we're past all that, now. This is *my* part of the house."

Eventually, they came to an oak door, and Lucifer stopped. He lay his hand on the door and tapped his middle finger.

"Come in, Uncle Luci!" called Dru.

With a smile at Sam, Lucifer turned the knob and pushed the door open. Sam stepped inside.

Dru lay nestled against Leery's side, her head on his shoulder. "Oh!" she said and sprang to her feet. "We, uh..." She ran a hand down her clothes, smoothing away the wrinkles.

"Wassat?" mumbled Leery, cracking his eyes open. "Sam!" His face split with a large, wolfish grin.

Sam smiled. "Hello, you old dog. How are you feeling?"

Leery's grin faded a little. "Better every day," he said.

"But..."

"But I've got a long way to go before I'm in fighting shape."

"Nonsense," said Lucifer. "You are healing at a marvelous rate. Your muscles are reknitting, and your skin is almost whole again."

"I didn't mean to sound ungrateful," said Leery.

"You didn't," said Dru. "You sounded frustrated with being hurt."

Lucifer nodded. "I took it how you meant it, Leery."

"What's the prognosis?" asked Sam.

"A few more weeks," said the Lord of Lies. "Then he can start physical therapy. All in all, I hope to have him back to his normal self in a month or two."

"*Two*?" asked Leery.

Lucifer only smiled. "Probably one."

Leery groaned.

Sam looked around. "I don't know, Detective. It looks like the lap of luxury."

"And it is," said Leery. "But..."

"But you'd rather be out there, fighting crime," said Sam with a quirk to his lips.

"Well...yeah, but it sounds corny when you say it." Leery grimaced and shifted position with extreme care. "So, how's the case, Counselor?"

"I hate to count chickens, but I have a hard time imagining us losing."

"Good. When do you need me to testify?" asked Leery.

Sam glanced at Dru. "I'm not sure we will need you, Leery."

"What? Of course you will. He tried to kill me, didn't he?"

"Yes, but we can establish that with Dru or Detective Gonofrio's testimony."

"Oh, no," said Leery. "You call me, McCoy. You hear me? You put me on the stand so I can look in that bastard's eye and tell the world what he did." Leery's breath came fast and more than a little ragged. Dru stepped closer and lay her hand on his shoulder.

"Okay, Detective," said McCoy. "I'll have Angie let you know when we expect to call you." He glanced at Lucifer and raised an eyebrow.

"What's that look for?" demanded Leery. "I'll be there, Counselor. You just call me to the stand and see if I'm not there. In fact"—he pushed himself off the pillows on shaking arms—"I'll be there whether you call me or not. When does it start? When are opening arguments? I'm going to sit right behind you so that jury can see what that...that...*lizard* did to me!"

"Okay, Leery," said Sam in a soothing voice. "Okay."

"Now, I think it's time we let you rest," said Lucifer. He glanced at Dru, and she nodded.

"Lay back, Leery," she said, exerting gentle pressure on his shoulder.

Leery glanced at her, then slumped back on the pillows. "Right. Save my strength for the trial."

"That's right," Dru said in a tender voice.

10

Angie raised an eyebrow at him and cocked her head to the side. Sam shook his head and whispered, "Later." He sank down beside her and scooched his chair in under the prosecution table. King Arthur gave him a slow, regal nod, and he nodded back.

Morgana Le Fay swept into the courtroom. She gave McCoy a look, then took the bench with a flourish. "I call this proceeding to order," she said with a wave at her gavel. The gavel banged off the sound block and returned

to its cradle. "Now that we've all returned to this realm, that is."

Sam blushed a little but didn't drop his gaze as he stood. "My apologies, Your Honor. I was visiting a wounded officer."

"Yes, well," she said. "After careful consideration of both sides of the matter, I'm ready to rule on your motion. There is really only one choice. If I allow the civil case to proceed, I believe I must put a hold on the criminal case, but in so doing, I withhold pertinent information from the Civil Part. Therefore, I believe it is in the interest of justice to grant your requests, both on the stay of proceedings in the civil matter, and a gag order imposed on all parties. No leaks to the press, ladies and gentlemen, or I fear I might grow cross." She glared at both tables. "Am I understood?"

"I shall appeal, Your Honor," said Brigit Agon.

"But you understand my order?"

"Yes!" snapped the dragon magister.

"And you, Mr. McCoy?"

"Of course, Judge Le Fay."

Morgana nodded. "Then we will proceed as scheduled."

"Thank you, Your Honor," said McCoy.

"Both parties will be ready to proceed tomorrow morning at nine sharp."

Brigit Agon shook her head. "That gives me no time to file an appeal, Your Honor."

"You have the rest of the afternoon to find a judge willing to grant you a stay in the Criminal Part."

Brigit looked as though she'd tasted something extremely foul but had no more to say.

Morgana nodded and levitated her gavel, letting it drop on the sound block with a thump.

II

Sam sat in Morgana Le Fay's courtroom at quarter to nine the next morning, enjoying the stillness, the quiet. He sometimes came to court early before a big case, just to enjoy the solitude and let his mind idle. He knew his opening cold, as he always did, and he had no second thoughts

about their strategy. Sometimes it was best to let things lie, rather than constantly churn about what might or might not happen.

Behind him, the door to the hall creaked open, and he glanced over his shoulder. Brigit Agon and her father stood in the doorway, each staring at him through slit eyelids. "You might as well come in," he said. "An empty courtroom before a trial is the quietest place in the building."

"Yes," she said. The pair walked to the defense table and sat—Brigit putting her briefcase down and taking out a pad and a few pens, and Dr. Agon staring straight ahead.

"Butterflies?" asked McCoy.

"Mr. McCoy," she grated, "we are not friends. We are not really colleagues. Let's not pretend it's any different." McCoy shrugged and resumed staring at nothing, thinking about nothing. Agon twiddled with her pad, then uncapped one of the pens, only to cap it again without writing a thing. She glanced at him sidelong, then shook her head. "You know this prosecution is wrong," she said.

"Do I?" Sam asked.

"Yes. You know my father is innocent, and even if he weren't, the actions taken by the police in this matter—"

"Well, that's what the trial is for, isn't it? To prove your father guilty or not? To allow a jury to hear the evidence, to listen to the testimony, and decide which of us has the right of the matter?"

Agon sniffed. "A jury of his peers? And how many dragons will there be?"

"None that I know of. There were two in the pool of potential jurors, but as I recall, you exercised peremptory challenges against both."

"They were unsuitable." Beside her, Agon snorted.

Sam shrugged. "Well, there you go."

"You can't expect me to believe that no suitable dragons could be found."

"Define suitable," said McCoy. "For some reason, I think your definition will amount to a predisposition toward the murder of other races by dragonkind."

Agon snorted again. "This is why my father should be tried in the courts of our homeland," said Brigit.

"Then he should have committed his crimes there. In your *vanished* homeland."

Brigit sniffed and turned away, muttering under her breath.

King Arthur wafted in, sliding right through the wall from Judge Le Fay's chambers, the giant stone in Excalibur's hilt winking at them as it passed through the wood. He glanced at Sam, then Agon, then nodded to McCoy with a lopsided grin.

"Your Majesty," said Sam. "How is she this morning?"

"As right as rain," said Arthur. "I'll thank the two of you to keep your civility toward Judge Le Fay. She has been feeling out of phase with the realm lately."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Sam.

At the same moment, Brigit Agon said, "Not my problem." The press began to filter into the gallery, their quiet susurration not quite hiding Arthur's growl.

"Would it kill you to show a little courtesy?" asked Sam. "Even if what you allege about the NYPD is true, Judge Le Fay had nothing to do with it."

Brigit smirked at Sam. "Fetch your mistress," she said to Arthur.

Angie came down the aisle and through the bar's gate. She paused a moment, her gaze resting on Arthur's expression, but the bailiff turned away and went through the door leading to the judge's chambers. "Wow," she said, taking her seat. "Who pissed in his Wheaties?"

"Our esteemed colleague," said Sam.

"Well, she is a bundle of joy and happy thoughts." Angie leaned closer and whispered. "Leery's here. I couldn't stop him, and neither could Dru. As a result, Lucifer is also out in the hall and says he will not leave Leery's side."

Sam sucked his teeth. "See about getting him a chair designed for his size. I suppose Leery is—"

"Luci insisted on a wheelchair."

Sam arched his eyebrows. "And our favorite wolf went for that?"

"He had no choice. Dru's pretty fierce where Leery's health is concerned."

"Yes, I'd noticed."

Angie quirked her head to the side. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Not a thing," said Sam. "They seem very close, however."

"Yes, that they are, but everything is perfectly in order."

"If you say so."

"I do," said Angie with a firm nod. "They both know where the lines are, and both seem dedicated to staying on the right side of them."

"For now."

"Yes, for now."

Sam drew a deep breath. "Go see about a chair for His Majesty."

Angie went and whispered in the ear of another bailiff—a troll who gave her a look filled with awe and fear—who then turned and hustled out of the room. As Luci and Dru brought Leery in, Arthur supervised a fistful of bailiffs rearranging the gallery to accommodate Leery, Lucifer, and Dru, directly behind the prosecution table. Leery already looked exhausted but determined. After they settled into their places, Arthur floated to the center of the room and called, "All rise!"

Morgana Le Fay flew through her door and went to the bench without fanfare. She waved a hand at her gavel, and as it banged on the sound block, she said, "Be seated. I call this court to order. Bailiff, please fetch the jury." Arthur Pendragon moved to the jury room door

and opened it, ushering the jurors into the jury box. "Mr. McCoy? Are you ready to proceed?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And you, Ms. Agon?"

"No, Judge Le Fay, I am not."

Silence descended on the courtroom like a shroud over a corpse. Le Fay narrowed her eyes and glowered at the defense magister. "And why not?"

"Your Honor's ruling of yesterday has changed my client's circumstances. I need time to prepare a strategy in light of that ruling."

Morgana frowned. "You're asking me for a continuance?"

"If you would be so kind, Judge."

Red splotches appeared high on Morgana's pale cheeks, and her eyes narrowed further. "Was I unclear at the conclusion of the motion hearing yesterday, Ms. Agon?"

"No, you were perfectly clear, but at the same time, you were not willing to listen to reason, either."

"Was I not?" A dangerous edge cracked in Morgana's voice, and Arthur's hand drifted to Excalibur's gilded hilt. "Did I not hear your

arguments? Did I not provide you advice on seeking a stay?"

"A fool's errand!" snapped Agon. "My daughter is—"

Brigit lay a hand on his shoulder, and the dragon quieted. "Forgive the outburst, Your Honor," she said. "My client is frustrated with the justice system in general these days—and this court, in particular."

"I'm certainly sorry for his frustration," said Le Fay in a gelid voice. "I do find that guilty parties are generally frustrated when they don't get their way concerning their cases." She fluttered a hand in the air. "I am so very broken up by it."

"Your Honor, I request—"

"*Denied*!" snapped Le Fay. "You've had plenty of time to prepare, Counselor." She jerked her gaze toward McCoy. "Proceed, sir."

"Thank you, Your Honor," said Sam, getting to his feet. "If it pleases the Court, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the People have indicted the dragon known as David Robert Agon, Ph.D. on seven counts, each one a serious crime by its lonesome. First, we've charged the defendant with three counts of aggravated battery on a law enforcement officer, a count

of attempted murder of a law enforcement officer"—Sam held his hand out toward Leery, and the jurors all turned to look—"and two counts of magical murder during the commission of a felony, in this case, the last charge of robbery. We submit that Dr. Agon committed the robbery in a misguided attempt to reassemble his lost hoard of gold and jewels. Now," said Sam, pausing for a grim smile, "Agon is certainly no stranger to robbery or to the consequences of such a crime, having just been released on parole from a lengthy dungeon term in the Locus of Baltimore. It is the People's considered opinion that the defendant committed the initial murders to avoid prosecution on the robbery charges. We can—and will—prove that the defendant was interested in the acquisition of gems and precious metals by any means possible. In this case, you will hear the testimony of sworn officers of the law that Agon met with them in order to acquire a gemstone without proof of provenance. As they moved to arrest him, Agon committed the batteries on three law enforcement officers and attempted to murder one of them. You will hear the testimony of that officer, whom you've already noticed in

the gallery today. May I mention that Detective Sergeant Leery Oriscoe is so dedicated to the pursuit of justice in this case that he couldn't be dissuaded from attending the proceedings—even when his health dictates otherwise. You will hear why from his own lips, later in the trial." McCoy turned and looked at the defense table. "The defendant has refused representation by a magister versed in criminal law, against both my advice and the advice of Her Honor. I—"

"Your Honor!" said Brigit Agon, springing to her feet.

"Overruled," said Le Fay. "The prosecutor has stated nothing but fact."

"Thank you, Judge," said Sam. "I will walk you through the events in this case, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I will explain the crimes committed by David Robert Agon, Ph.D. and, at the conclusion of the trial, you will find you have no choice but to return a guilty verdict on all charges." McCoy shrugged. "It really is that simple." He gave them one last solemn look, then returned to his seat.

Morgan nodded at him once. "Ms. Agon?"

"Yes, Judge?"

"Your opening statement?"

Brigit shrugged and stood. "Ladies and gentlemen, this trial is a farce. Yesterday, Judge Le Fay made a ruling—"

"Objection, Your Honor," said Sam.

"Sustained." Morgana gave the jury a stern look, then glowered at the defense magister. "Ms. Agon, you will confine yourself to the actions of the defendant in this matter. It is improper to bring rulings and motions not germane to this proceeding to the jury. I will not tolerate it."

Brigit drew a deep breath and puffed her cheeks out at the jury. "Well, why not?" she said. "Since I've been barred from pursuing—"

"Do we have a problem, Ms. Agon?" asked Le Fay in a sickly-sweet voice. "Shall we adjourn to my chambers to discuss it?"

"No, Your Honor, but I would like to speak more than one or two sentences before being interrupted."

"Then confine yourself to the facts of the case and your legal arguments supporting those facts."

Again, Brigit sighed and made a face at the jury. "Yes, Your Honor. Your courtroom, your rules. Message received."

"I won't have it, Ms. Agon. One more statement like that will cost you five hundred dollars for contempt."

"Five hundred dollars?" Brigit flipped a diamond the size of a cherry. "How much contempt for this court does this allow me to express?"

"Just about that much," said Morgana as she waved Arthur to take the stone. "Have any more you'd like to donate to the displaced gremlins fund?" She arched an eyebrow as Brigit simmered. "No? Then I advise you to get on with your statement."

For a moment, Brigit's face writhed, showing hints of the dragon it hid, but then she mastered herself. "Very well, Your Honor. Mr. McCoy has painted an ugly picture of my client. Allow me to show you the real Dr. Agon. He has always been interested in gems—he's a dragon, right?" She smiled at the jury as though she'd said something funny. "In fact, he pursued an advanced degree in the subject. As to so-called provenance, ownership *is* provenance to the dragon community. For example, consider the diamond I just donated to help those poor lost gremlins who were so callously fed after midnight. I've owned it for a

thousand years. No one disputes my ownership because of my reputation in the community. These ideas of paperwork and pretty certificates are foreign to my kind. We don't need them. We keep our gems out where we can see them. We know where they are at all times, and in the case of when we part with one, we know where it goes." She nodded at Arthur. "Now, as to the disparaging remarks Mr. McCoy made about my client's so-called crimes in the Locus of Baltimore, I'd have you consider the fate of *any* being who uses a supernatural defender against the likes of Mr. McCoy. How many entities are languishing in prison, though perfectly innocent of the crimes they were convicted of? With respect to the so-called robbery my client is accused of, I ask you to keep the following questions in mind." She held up her closed fist. "First, what was stolen? It seems difficult to have a robbery without someone stealing something. Second, where is that item now? In whose possession? Here's a hint: it's not my client. Third, these so-called murder victims, do *they* have a record for violence? Do *they* have a record of felonies committed with violence?"

"What's she talking about?" whispered Sam.

"Nothing I know anything about," said Angie. "Those men have no records of any kind."

"Objection, Your Honor," said Sam.

Brigit sneered but bowed her head.

"Where's the proof that the *victims* in this case have criminal records?"

"Ms. Agon?" asked Morgana Le Fay.

"I will establish the proof of my claims as I present my case."

"You have such proof?" asked the judge, "or do you simply hope to find some by then?"

"Fine, Your Honor," said Brigit. "I can see where this is going. I withdraw the statement." But she turned to the jury and winked. "As to all these charges levied against my client for his so-called attacks against police officers"—she shook her head sadly—"I'll tell you a secret. My client attacked no one but was rather attacked himself. *Attacked*, I say, by a werewolf and a demon, and when they failed to get the better of him, they called in first one of the Nephilim and when he, too, failed, they called a bitch from Hell itself to come hurt my client. A dancing whore of—"

In the gallery, Lucifer coughed into his closed fist.

Morgana glanced his direction and lifted an eyebrow. "To whom are you referring, Ms. Agon?"

"That little hussy's mother!" she snapped, pointing a finger at Dru, who smiled at her like she was lunch.

Morgana frowned. "I'm not used to people disparaging one of the Four Queens of Gehenna in my courtroom, madame."

"*Gehenna*!" Brigit spat. "Hell! A realm full of demons, ruled by a devil!"

This time Lucifer chuckled. "Not 'a devil,' if you please. *The* Devil. Show some respect."

"Ms. Agon, I'm delighted to inform you that you've just finished your opening statement. Sit down."

Brigit stared daggers at the judge, and once again, Arthur rested his hand on his sword hilt.

"I said, *sit down*," hissed Morgana, half rising to her feet.

Brigit glanced at Arthur, then smiled at the jury and sank into her chair.

"Well, now," said Le Fay. "Wasn't that exciting?" She cast her gaze on Lucifer. "Please accept the Court's apologies, Your Majesty."

Lucifer waved it away, all smiles.

"Mr. McCoy? Are you ready to present your case?"

"Yes, Your Honor, and with pleasure." Sam stood, but then he glanced at Leery over his shoulder. "Uh, if you would indulge me, Your Honor, I'd like to change the order of my witnesses."

Morgana's gaze fell on Leery's gray-cast complexion and nodded her head.

"Then I call Detective Leery Oriscoe to the stand."

Lucifer, himself, wheeled Leery to the witness box and bent the microphone down so it would pick up Leery's weak voice. He lay a hand on Leery's shoulder. "Okay?" he asked.

Leery glanced up, then nodded once.

Arthur swore him in, and Lucifer retreated to the gallery. Sam approached him, a concerned expression on his face. "Are you well, Detective Oriscoe?"

"Well enough to testify," Leery grated.

"If you need to stop, please say so. I'm sure the Court will oblige a rest."

"Yes," said Morgana. "Anytime you need it."

Leery nodded. "Thanks, Judge."

"Now then, Detective Oriscoe. Can you tell us how you came to be in that wheelchair?"

Leery sniffed. "Well, it wasn't from drinking coffee at the local Starbucks." As the jury chuckled, he raised a shaking finger to point at Agon. "The dragon sitting right there first set me on fire, then batted me through a wall and hit me with his breath." He dropped his arm. "And if I could be so bold, Agon, mouthwash would go a long way."

The corners of McCoy's lips twitched with a suppressed grin. "And this was after you attacked him unprovoked?"

"That's the thing, see? That magister sitting next to him is his daughter, and she's about as loose with the truth as she is with diamonds."

"Then it's your testimony that the things Ms. Agon said in her opening statement—the characterization of your encounter with Dr. Agon—aren't accurate?"

Leery chuckled, and it turned into an ugly cough. "They are bald-faced lies and worse," he grated. "Had he come along quietly, Agon would have been read his rights and transported to the Twenty-seventh Precinct without violence of any sort. All my partner did was cast a restraining rune set at him. At the same time, I let my wolf out and grabbed him

by the upper arm. He shouted something like 'You'll never take me back' and then he began hurling spells around with his mind."

"I see," said McCoy. He crossed one arm across his chest and rested the other elbow in his palm, resting his hand against his chin in a thoughtful pose. "And then?"

Leery nodded. "And then, the fight was on."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah. Agon was so pissed he didn't even give us time to read him his rights."

"What, specifically, happened?"

Leery closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "First, he threw a bunch of crap at me via telekinesis or magic or something. It drove me back, knocked me down. He turned on Dru—uh, my partner, Detective Dru Nogan—and things started to heat up. Agon started his own transformation, and Detective Nogan called for backup, which seemed to confuse him—"

"Calling for backup?"

"Yeah," said Leery with a shrug followed by a wince. "She said something like 'Get up here. We need you.' I guess Agon hadn't sussed out that the meeting was under surveillance. Anyway, he started going after Detective

Nogan, who is my Warder, and I charged at him. He snapped his head around and stared at me like he wanted to cook me. He set the air on fire with his magic, I guess, and it caused an explosion—like those fires that snap up all the air in the room."

"And that was the first time he burned you?"

"Yes. He would have killed me right there, I think, but Dru—Detective Nogan—distracted him again, maybe mesmerized him, I'm not sure. Whatever she did, it stopped the heat, and everything cooled off, but I was on fire, and the explosion had knocked me for a loop." Leery shrugged and winced again. "Can't seem to remember not to do that," he muttered. "Anyway, it took me a minute to get my head back together, and during that time, his transformation had progressed. He was threatening my partner, lunging at her like a snake."

Agon hissed in anger.

"You are referring to a dragon's ability to shapeshift into his true form?"

"Yeah. That. Detective Nogan was in big trouble, and our backup hadn't arrived." Leery started to shrug and stopped himself. "I did what any Claw would do."

"Let's be clear for the jury, shall we? You, already half-burnt to death, groggy from the explosion, and *on fire*, charged a dragon single-handedly?"

"Well, it sounds kind of crazy the way you say it, but Dru was in trouble. I did what I had to do."

McCoy turned and glanced at the jury. "Which was attack a dragon single-handedly and without a weapon."

"Just my claws and fangs," said Leery. "Most times, they're enough."

"I'm sure, Detective," said Sam. "So, you saved your partner. What was the price?"

Leery shot a glare at the defense table. "The bastard hit me, knocked me through the wall, and followed that up with his bad breath."

"Leaving you as you are?"

"Oh, no," said Leery. "As I understand it, I was mostly dead. Dru—Detective Nogan—cast an Angelic blessing on me, and—"

"The same Detective Nogan who is also known as Drusilla bat Agrat bat Mahlat, Princess of Gehenna?"

"Yeah," said Leery, his gaze on hers, a soft smile on his lips. "She risked a lot to get that blessing off. Saved my life, without a doubt."

"And that spell was enough to speed your recovery?"

"No. There's no doubt it saved my life—none at all—but it wasn't strong enough to accelerate my healing very much, I don't think."

"Then how are you here? The extent of the damage from a dragon's breath is well documented. You should be in intensive care still."

"I have no doubt that's true. Lucky for me, I know a guy with a little skill in magic. He's been taking care of me."

"You refer to His Majesty, Lucifer ben Mahlat? The King of Gehenna?"

"Yeah. Big lug that he is, he's got a soft spot for me. I think it's because my wolf is religious. His Majesty respects people of faith. But maybe it's my dashing good looks and my love of coffee."

Sam smiled at the jury. "And his treatments have brought you to this point?"

"Sure. He set me up in one of his guest rooms, and he's taken the time to see to my care personally. He sees to my wounds four times a day."

"He uses magic to do so?"

"Yep," said Leery.

"Then the Locus of New York owes His Majesty a debt of gratitude."

"I'm not sure about the Locus of New York, but I sure do."

"What happened after Dr. Agon hit you with his breath?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know. I assume, since we're here, and he's sitting at the defense table, that Agon was apprehended."

"I see," said Sam. "Then you have no firsthand knowledge of his capture?"

"None whatsoever," said Leery.

"Thank you for making the extra effort to be here—despite your injuries."

"I'd say it was my pleasure, but that would be a lie." Leery grimaced and shifted positions in the wheelchair with a groan.

"I imagine so." Sam turned and strolled back to the prosecution table. "Your witness," he said to Brigit.

The dragon magister all but leaped to her feet and charged toward the witness box, eyes whirling, face cranked up to a class five sneer. "You say my father caused your injuries in an unprovoked attack?"

"Yep," said Leery, flashing his most infuriating smile at her.

"Yet you freely admit to laying hands on him first!"

"I grabbed his arms to restrain him. It wasn't an attack."

"So were I to grab your arms"—she lunged at him, stopping just short of laying hands on him—"you'd have no issue with it?"

Leery twitched back in his wheelchair, then gasped as a wave of bright pain washed over him.

"Your Honor!" yelled Sam, on his feet in an instant. Angie followed suit, and Arthur gripped Excalibur as though he longed to draw the blade and set it singing. Even the jury foreman had leaned toward the witness box.

"Ms. Agon!" snapped Le Fay. "You skirt the legal definition of assault in front of a courtroom of witnesses! I'd suggest you get a grip before I have you locked up."

"Just making a point, Your Honor. Each one of you assumed what I just did is a form of attack." She tipped a wink at Leery. "I apologize for your pain, but hasn't this been an informative exercise?"

"Lady, there's nothing to it," croaked Leery. "You're a magister, and from what I've seen, a particularly half-assed one at that. I'm a police officer. My actions and yours are not equivalent."

"No?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"No. I'm authorized to take people into custody. I'm empowered by the Locus of New York to make arrests, to restrain criminals, to use lethal force where necessary. When I grab someone in the course of my duty, it isn't a crime. When you grab someone, it is."

"And yet, the point stands. Every official in this courtroom reacted as though I were attacking you." She turned to the jury, a smug expression on her face. "Is it so hard to imagine my client feeling attacked? Tell me, Detective, did you identify yourself as a police officer before laying hands on my client?"

"I'm sure I did."

"Then you don't remember?"

Leery grunted. "I do remember telling him he was under arrest."

"And if someone approached you—say during the course of a business deal fraught with the stress of dealing with individuals who are knowingly breaking the law—"

"Like your dad, you mean?"

"Like the so-called upstanding jewelers who make under-the-table deals every single day in this city." She smirked at him. "Like the people you and your partner were pretending to be. If someone like that grabbed you and said you were under arrest, would you accept them at face value, or would you struggle?"

"First off, I wouldn't be in that situation. Unless I was undercover. Second, whatever my reaction was it wouldn't be attempted murder."

"No?" asked Brigit, one eyebrow curved toward the sky.

"You can bet on it."

"Hmm," she said and tapped her front tooth with a lacquered nail. "Tell me, Detective. Is the entity seeing to your medical needs the same entity who the Locus Magister's office called on to place an enchantment on my client?"

"I have no idea. I've been a little under the weather."

Brigit rolled her eyes. "Fine. As I understand your testimony, you claim not to remember what happened after you attacked my client for the second time?"

"I don't remember anything that happened after your father came very close to killing me, no."

"Then you don't remember the naked whore who ascended from the Pit to torture my client?"

In the gallery, Lucifer growled, and for a moment, no one so much as breathed.

"Do I really need to define the word *anything* for you?" asked Leery.

"Fine. Then let's talk about things that occurred before that time. Do you remember stalking and chasing my client through Riverside Park? I believe you were in the company of that Nephilim who also attacked my client the night of his arrest."

"We had your father under surveillance. We were not stalking him."

"And the difference is?"

"The difference is that when a cop surveils you, it's because you're a bottom-feeding lizard who commits murder!" Leery snapped.

"Uh, Your Honor," said Sam, "perhaps the witness could use a break?"

"Oh, of course," said Brigit. "Why not? Let's shield the jury from his *true* nature. Let's allow

him time to get his story straight before he has to come back and answer my questions."

"Ms. Agon," said Le Fay in a wretched tone, "you weary me." She turned and gazed at Leery. "Detective, do you need a rest break?"

"I'd rather not, Your Honor. I'm not sure I could make it back."

Morgana nodded and looked back at Sam. He nodded and sat down.

"So why didn't you arrest my client that evening? If, as you say, everything was on the up and up?"

"We didn't yet know your father was the murderer. And plus, he shapeshifted and attacked us, then flew away."

Brigit rolled her eyes. "He *roared*, Detective. Hardly an attack. But did I hear you correctly? Did you just admit you had another suspect?"

"Well, yes. But we cleared him later."

"I see. But you made no attempt to clear my client?"

"Actually, we did. Had he been innocent, our undercover operation would not have brought him to where he sits."

"Oh, I see. He's guilty, so you need an undercover sting to catch him, but he's only

guilty if you catch him in an undercover sting?"

"That about sums it up," said Leery with a twisted smile.

"Detective, are you aware of the term circular reasoning?"

"It was a joke, Counselor. Are you aware of the term sarcasm?"

Brigit sighed and hit the jury with a mournful expression. "This isn't a joke to me or my client, Detective. Unlike you, we both take matters of the law very seriously."

"Objection," said Sam.

"Sustained. The jury will disregard the defense magister's last statement."

Brigit only grinned at the jury. "Shall we return to the evening of my client's arrest? Tell us about when your partner called her mother from the depths of Hell to accost my client."

"As far as I know, Detective Nogan made no call like you describe."

"Then how was my client apprehended? By your Nephil friend?" Brigit's lip curled as though the very thought was worthy of scorn.

"I've already told you—"

"Right, right. That curiously fallible memory of yours. Do you expect us to believe such

frivolity? Such speciousness?" She whirled and glared down at him. "Tell us the truth! Or are you incapable of anything but deceit?"

"Your Honor, the defense is badgering an unwell witness," said Lucifer.

"I'll thank Your Majesty to remain silent unless called upon to speak. This is a court of law, sir."

"My apologies, Your Honor," said Lucifer, but a small smile played on his lips as he winked at Brigit Agon.

"Accepted. And His Majesty is correct, Ms. Agon. Do you have any proper questions for the witness?"

Brigit sneered at Leery once again. "I'm done with him."

"Then Detective Oriscoe may step down with the thanks of the Court." She glanced at the gallery as Lucifer and Dru stood. "We'll take a ten-minute recess while the witness is transported." She waved at her gavel and banged on the sound block. Le Fay stood, then disappeared with a weary sigh.

12

Leery slumped against the side of the wheelchair, his face gray with fatigue and pain, eyes half-lidded. "How'd I do, Counselor?" he croaked.

"You did well, Leery," said Angie.

"I showed 'em." His voice was weak, and his hands shook on the armrests.

"You should go home, now," said Sam. "Let the rest of us show them a move or two."

"Nah. I'm okay. Just give me a minute." He pulled at his collar. "And something hot to drink." He batted his eyes at Dru.

"Yeah, he's fine," she said with a laugh. "One *trenta* coming up."

13

True to his word, Leery was back in his place behind Sam when Judge Le Fay called the next session to order. He looked better, he sat straighter, and he sipped from his *trenta* and smiled.

"Call your next witness, Mr. McCoy."

"Thank you, Your Honor. The People call Detective Vinbert Gonofrio."

As Vinny entered, his gaze found Leery's, and he gave him a smile and a thumbs-up. Leery saluted him with his Starbucks cup. Brigit Agon watched the exchange through narrowed eyelids. Arthur escorted Gonofrio to the witness stand and swore him in.

"Detective Gonofrio," said Sam, approaching the jury box. "Thank you for being here today."

"Of course," said Vinny. "I go where I'm needed."

"Take us through the investigation of Dr. Agon, if you will."

"Happy to, Mr. McCoy. Agon... You know, I never thought about it until now, but 'agon' is

from the Greek. It means 'conflict.'" He leaned out to give Leery a look.

"And is that significant?"

"I think so. One of the murdered jewelers told Detectives Oriscoe and Nogan that the entity who killed them used the name Dr. Conflict."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. It's all in Detective Nogan's notes."

"Your Honor, really, I must object to this hearsay."

"Your Honor, the People are happy to have the statements stricken. I can call the Magical Examiner from the crime scene investigation and garner the information on direct." Sam tipped a wink at Brigit, and she scowled.

"Fine with me, Mr. McCoy," said Judge Le Fay. "The witness recollections regarding the name will be stricken."

Sam turned back to Gonofrio. "Continue, Detective."

Vinny grinned. "Happy to. Together with Oriscoe and Nogan, we had reason to believe Agon was behind a string of robberies—"

"Objection, Your Honor!" snapped Brigit. "My client is not charged with a string of robberies."

"Indeed, he is not. Would you care to rephrase, Detective?"

"Pardon me, Your Honor, but I said, 'we had reason to believe,' not 'he committed.'"

"Then you no longer believe it?" asked Le Fay.

"Oh, no. Limiting myself only to what I believe, he did the whole string. But, alas, I haven't found enough proof for Mr. McCoy to bring the charges as of yet."

Le Fay nodded. "Then I encourage you to limit yourself to what you can prove."

"Very well, Judge Le Fay," said Vinny. "We were investigating a string of robberies, and Detectives Oriscoe and Nogan were investigating a similar crime that included two murders. We decided to narrow the field, having surmised that the perpetrator was on parole in this locus but from another jurisdiction. We—"

"A moment, Detective," said Sam. "Could you explain that?"

"Sure. It's simple, really. We reasoned that if a dragon were behind the crimes—and by that time, I was sure it was so—he wouldn't be limited to this geographic location. He could realm-hop or merely fly to another locus. You

know, spread the crimes around to distribute the heat from law enforcement. The best explanation for why he wasn't doing that was that he was on parole, released to someone in the Locus of New York and confined here."

"I see. It seems a bit of a stretch—"

"No, here's why it makes perfect sense," said Vinny earnestly. "A dragon trapped within Manhattan would have few options for rebuilding his hoard. He'd have to buy new gems and metals from dealers in the city, he'd have to steal them, or he'd have to rely on the charity of others."

"He wouldn't set himself to work? Reacquire the hoard through legitimate means?"

"Some might," admitted Gonofrio, "but we reasoned our perpetrator had already cut a corner or two—hence the dungeon time elsewhere. Also, dragons are a proud bunch, and the time it takes to rebuild wealth these days... Well, that's a long time to borrow a small fortune to recuperate on."

"I see your point. Go on, please, Detective."

"Given the constraints we'd established, the only real obstacle was the decrepit nature of the Department of Corrections records. It would be incredibly easy to design and

implement a proper data-driven system for advanced searches, fast-retrieval of information, and..." Vinny shook his head and grinned. "Sorry. I'm passionate about data systems."

"No apology necessary," said Sam. "But I take it you found viable suspects in spite of the poor system?"

"We did. Detective Oriscoe suggested we focus on the two most likely candidates, clear them, then move to the next two."

"And you agreed?"

"Sure," said Gonofrio with a quick shrug. "Proceeding in that way meant we had the highest likelihood of finding the perpetrator in the shortest possible time."

"I see. And what happened next?"

"We set about surveilling the two best candidates. One of them happened to be the defendant."

"Very well. Please take us to the night you apprehended Dr. Agon."

"Of course." Vinny shot a guilty look at Leery, then cut his eyes away. "We'd decided to lay a trap for the defendant by offering a rare gem for sale and offering to buy a few gems similar to those stolen in the earlier crimes.

Detectives Oriscoe and Nogan posed as gem dealers willing to...uh...take a liberal view of the rules regarding paperwork. The defendant called to inquire, then made an appointment to check out the stone we had on offer."

Sam nodded.

"He arrived and participated in the song and dance routine Detective Nogan offered him. He decided to purchase the gem after selling them a gem we later identified as having come from the scene of the murders."

"I see. Is there another way the defendant could have come to be in possession of the gem?"

"He could have purchased it from another party, ultimately tracing back to the person who committed the crime."

"So, at that time, you were not sure the defendant was the murderer?"

"No, not at all. All we had him on was sale of stolen merchandise and purchasing the gem without proper provenance."

"And what would his possible sentence have amounted to?"

"Worst case? Five to ten years."

"I see. Nothing to kill over, then."

"No. For a dragon, that's like half-a-heartbeat."

"Was your ploy successful?"

"You could say that." Again, Vinny's guilty gaze flickered to Leery and away. "Another interpretation is that it wasn't worth it."

"I understand," said Sam. "But what I meant was that you recorded the meeting and then had evidence against the defendant."

"Yes, that's right."

"Evidence you could have used to pressure him to give up the perpetrator of the original crime, if, in fact, the defendant was innocent of the crimes?"

"Yes. And that would have likely involved a plea arrangement."

"Even less time than that five to ten years you mentioned."

"Probably a lot less. He may have gotten by with probation by claiming to have been hoodwinked and cooperating with our investigation."

Sam nodded. "But it didn't go that way, did it?"

"No," said Vinny. "Instead, the defendant flipped out and started attacking Oriscoe and Nogan. Detective Nogan called for backup—

which was me—and I started up to assist, but..." This time his guilt-ridden gaze found Leery's and held it. "I was slow. The elevator was screwed up, and I didn't think fast enough about alternate methods of ascending to the proper floor. By the time I got up there, Agon had already flamed Detective Oriscoe and stood over Detective Nogan, threatening her life."

"And what did you do?"

Gonofrio shrugged. "I shielded her as best I could."

"Successfully, thank the Powers," said Sam.

Vinny nodded once. "Yes."

"And then what happened?"

"My delay had left Detective Nogan in fear of her life, and she'd called on other parties for assistance."

"Other parties?"

"Her mother, Her August Majesty, Agrat bat Mahlat, Sovereign of Demons, Commander of the Eighteen Legions, the Dancing Roof-Demon, She of the Great and Terrible Name."

"And did Her Majesty heed her daughter's call?"

Vinny grinned at Agon. "With extreme prejudice."

"What do you mean by that, Detective?" asked Sam with a solemn expression.

"She kicked his ever-loving ass, Mr. McCoy."

Sam pursed his lips to keep from smiling and nodded. "I see. Did you, at any time, witness Her Majesty, Agrat bat Mahlat, commit acts of wanton violence?"

"Well, sure, but not *unwarranted* wanton violence."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Detective," said Sam.

"Her Majesty pulled no punches, Counselor. The defendant threatened Detective Nogan's life, and Queen Agrat took exception to it—as is a mother's prerogative. She did what she had to in order to contain the situation—a situation that the defendant authored."

"So, no torture?" Sam turned to stare at Brigit Agon. "No terrorizing the defendant?"

"Definitely no torture," said Vinny.

"In your opinion, were any lines of propriety crossed? Any laws broken in the apprehension of the defendant."

"Only by the defendant."

"And was the threat the defendant presented dire enough that the use of deadly force was called for?"

"Yes, certainly. If it hadn't been for Her Majesty's intervention, I believe I would have had to kill the defendant to protect Detective Nogan's life."

"Is it your testimony, then, that the Queen Agrat's actions *saved* the life of the defendant."

Vinny turned to stare into Dr. Agon's hostile eyes. "Most definitely."

"And could you have killed him?"

"Most definitely."

Dr. Agon scoffed, but Vinny's gaze was as cold as the space between the galaxies.

"Thank you, Detective," said Sam. "I yield the witness, Your Honor."

"Very well, Mr. McCoy. Would you care to cross, Ms. Agon?"

"Are you kidding? I *can't wait*."

Morgana sighed. "Do your best to keep it civil and on point."

Brigit stalked toward the witness stand, fists clenched, eyes awhirl, and Judge Le Fay sighed again. "Before we get into the, ah, more interesting parts of your testimony, Detective, could you please share with the Court what qualifications or schooling you have that allows you to judge the relative dangers of a situation?"

"I'd be happy to. I'm a veteran of the Realm War, where I served as Master Tactician for the Archangel Michael. I've been in law enforcement ever since, both here and in other realms, serving on the SWAT team, the Occult Crime Unit, and most recently the Maleficium Cryptogenia Unit. I was special advisor to the Locus Cynosure during the terror crisis nineteen years ago. I was—"

"Fine." Brigit looked as though she'd swallowed something nasty. "Let us return to your assumptions, shall we?"

"It's your ball, Counselor. I'm only here to knock some out of the park."

"I'm going to pretend that I have any idea what you mean and that I find your comment beneath my dignity."

Vinny only grinned at her.

"You say you had other suspects."

"Yes."

"But you focused only on my client?"

"No."

"Would you care to elaborate, Detective?"

"It would be my pleasure. I'll answer any question you ask, Counselor."

Brigit sniffed, tilted her head back, and looked down her nose at him. "Detective, isn't

it true that while you had other viable suspects, you focused on my client to the exclusion of all others?"

"No."

"No? That's all you have to say?"

"It's the answer to your question, Ms. Agon," Vinny said softly.

"I see. Would you please elaborate on your answer by listing the names of the individuals you didn't investigate, choosing instead to focus on my client because of his ethnicity?"

"I'd be happy to. There are none."

"But earlier you testified that you elected to start with the two most probable suspects. Isn't that correct? Have I misunderstood?"

"It is correct. You have not misunderstood."

"Then please list their names."

"Oh. That isn't what you asked me before. You asked me to list the names of the suspects we ignored to focus on your client due to his ethnicity. I stand by my earlier response to that question. To this new question, anyone in the world might have been a suspect, but, not to put too fine an edge on it, your client was not only the best suspect but the actual perpetrator of the crimes in question."

Brigit's brows knotted. "Are you being flippant?"

"Maybe a little, but that makes my answers no less truthful." Again, Vinny treated her to a more than slightly irreverent grin.

"Detective, how many suspects did you have before you began to surveil my client?"

"A dozen? Perhaps more," said Vinny with a shrug.

"And what made you focus on my client?"

"At first?"

Brigit nodded.

"Nothing. We didn't focus on your client. We began our surveillance with two suspects and focused on clearing them. Your client was one of those first two. The other we cleared."

"And his name?"

Vinny turned toward the bench. "Your Honor, I'm loath to implicate a cleared suspect, given these proceedings are open to the public, and we categorically proved his innocence."

"Your Honor?" said McCoy. "The People will stipulate that the defendant was not the only person of interest in the case."

Morgana gazed up at the ceiling for a moment, then nodded. "Please move on, Ms. Agon."

Brigit's whole face twitched with anger, and her eyes blazed yellow for a moment. "You say you cleared this other mysterious suspect. Explain how."

Vinny shrugged. "We apprehended him trying to sell a gem without provenance. During the interview, I concluded he was innocent."

"Explain."

"I'm one of the Nephilim. I can sense truth the way you can sense light, wind, moisture. But even more than that, the suspect was a dragon, yet he came with us willingly, sat through our interrogation without a magister to represent him, and even helped us along in the investigation."

"And a guilty dragon would not do the same thing?"

Vinny looked at Dr. Agon. "No, a guilty dragon would attack the police trying to bring him in for questioning. He would launch a breath strike against an honorable man just trying to defend his partner. He would attempt to kill all and sundry who tried to bring him

in. Then, once faced with a being of greater power, would roll—"

"Fine. Let's move on!" snapped Brigit.

"—over like a kitten and start crying that everyone was picking on him. He'd then get his daughter the contract-law magister to try to represent him in his criminal trial and sit smirking as she botched it."

Brigit glared at him, subtle variegations on her face giving it the appearance of scales. "Be careful, Nephil. My temper has limits." Her voice shook with anger, and she seemed close to violence.

"Oh, I'm sure. Just like your father's."

The magister sniffed and forced calmness into her manner and tone. "Since you are obviously willing to perjure yourself to avoid my questions about the other suspects—"

"Not at all," said Vinny, all smiles. "I'm happy to answer any question you ask me, but I *will* answer honestly. You don't want that, Ms. Agon."

"Tell me of this Dancing Roof-Demon and her attack on my client."

"What would you like to know?"

Brigit sighed and squeezed her eyes shut. "I find you most disagreeable, Nephil."

"I choose to treat that as a question, Dragon, and as such, I'll admit that I also find you disagreeable."

"Very well," said Brigit with a tiny grin. "Did Agrat attack—"

"*Queen* Agrat," growled Arthur. "The forms *will* be followed, madam."

Brigit rolled her eyes. "Did *Queen* Agrat command my client to freeze? Did she attempt to arrest him?"

"I'm not sure," said Vinny.

"What? How can you be unsure? Did you witness the attack?"

"I witnessed Queen Agrat *act in the defense* of Detective Nogan and myself. But she brought a couple hundred demons with her, plus an archdemon. Between your father's roaring and crying, Her Majesty's battle screams, the thunderous roars of the archdemon, and the shouts of a couple of hundred demons, I can't honestly say what conversation went on between the queen and your client."

"Fine, fine!" snapped Brigit. "After the battle! After the fight, after she had subdued my client, what did the queen say to him?"

"Oh. That."

"Yes," said the magister with an evil grin. "What was it that Queen Agrat said to my father?"

"She said something like, 'Don't quit. I'm still mad at you.'"

"What did you take as her meaning?"

"That she wanted the fight to continue. That she wanted to punish your father for his misdeeds regarding her daughter. That she was angry and wanted to lash out."

"Thank you! Thank you, for at last abandoning the script the prosecutor has obviously fed you and telling the truth!"

Vinny shrugged.

"I'm done," said Brigit, turning and stomping back to her seat.

"Mr. McCoy? Would you care to redirect?"

"I would, Your Honor," said Sam with the grin of a man who'd just seen his plan work out better than he'd hoped.

"Do so at your leisure, then."

Sam stood and grinned at Gonofrio. "Detective, what happened after Queen Agrat said those words?"

Vinny grinned at the jury. "She stood back as it was clear the defendant had quit."

"She didn't continue to strike him once he gave up the fight?"

"No, sir."

"Not even in the depths of her righteous rage at seeing her child threatened, seeing her child mistreated?"

"Nope. She stood back and commanded her demons to hold him."

"Then what happened?"

"I asked for their help transporting the dragon to a secure facility."

"And why did you do that?"

"The defendant had already shown he was willing to kill, and that our status as law enforcement officers seemed to be of no importance to him. I judged it the safest route."

"Safest for yourself?"

"Yes, but also for the defendant. As I said, if I had to fight him in an earnest manner, I would have had to kill him."

"Yes, I believe you would," said Sam with a glance at Leery. "One last question, Detective Gonofrio."

"That's what I'm here for," said Vinny with his characteristic saucy grin.

"Did I coach you with regard to your testimony today? Did I provide you with a script?"

"No. The very idea is ludicrous and smacks of desperation." Gonofrio turned his stare on Brigit and winked. "Only a fool would make such a suggestion given you and I as the subjects."

"Thank you, Detective," said Sam.

"The witness is excused with the thanks of the Court," said Morgana.

As Gonofrio gathered himself and climbed down from the stand, Brigit Agon stood. "Judge Le Fay, I find I must ask you for a recess and a short continuance."

"To what end, Counselor?"

"I find I must add a name to my witness list and doing so is problematic. I will need a day to prepare a legal argument to combat the motion the LM's office will inevitably file."

"Points for intrigue, Ms. Agon, but I'm afraid I will need more. Who do you wish to add?"

"Her August Majesty, Agrat bat Mahlat, Queen of Gehenna."

The courtroom went so quiet a church mouse could have heard the head of a pin fart. Sam rose into that silence and cleared his

throat, "Your Honor, the Covenant of Sovereign Privilege states that—"

"This is why I need the continuance, Your Honor," said Agon. "I need to find an argument to overcome that obstacle."

"You can't elicit the evidence in some other fashion?" asked Morgana.

"No, Your Honor. I must inquire of Her Majesty directly and under oath."

Le Fay's gaze flicked to Lucifer's for a nanosecond, then up to the rafters once again. "Hmm," she hummed. "That does present an interesting legal question."

"Your Honor, I respectfully—"

"No. Thank you, Mr. McCoy, but we will save these arguments for the motion hearing—you do plan to file a motion to quash Ms. Agon's subpoena, don't you?"

"Absolutely!" said Sam.

"Fine. I'll hear your arguments at nine, two days hence. And, Ms. Agon?"

"Yes, Your Honor?"

"Ensure your arguments stand on their legal framework, not emotion."

"Yes, Your Honor."

Morgana waved her hand at the gavel, waited while it levitated, and slammed down on the sound block. "Court dismissed."

14

Tovah poked Sam in the back, stirring him from a dream about spoons and soap of all things. "Mmph," he grunted, snuggling down under the covers. But Tovah poked him again, and then he heard his phone ringing in the other room. He glanced at the bedside clock and groaned. "This better be good at three in the morning," he grumbled, swinging out of bed and scrubbing at his face with his palm. "And with court in the morning!"

"Tell whoever it is that I hate them," said Tovah.

"Right after I boil their blood."

He had his phone set to do not disturb, though, and he knew that if any of the select few who could get past that guardian were calling at this hour, it would be important.

He closed the door to the bedroom behind him so that Tovah could fall back asleep, then padded over to his phone, grimacing at the temperature of the floor under his bare feet. It didn't seem right that the floor should be cold throughout all four seasons, but some mysteries were beyond Sam's ken.

He glared down at the phone as he swept the lock screen aside. "Angie? What's up?"

"Sorry, Sam. It's Luci. I called on Angie's phone to get past your do not disturb settings.

"Ah. Uh, good morning, Your Majesty."

"Luci. Sam, I'm afraid I have bad news for you about your defendant."

"Dr. Agon?"

"The very one. My enchantment has been tinkered with."

"Dammit!"

"Indeed," said Lucifer.

"Can you still track him?"

"For the time being, but even that's not good news."

"No?"

"He's running, Sam. Realm-hopping while someone works to crack my spells."

"Oh, hell—uh, your pardon, Your—"

"Call me Luci. We've already agreed on that," said the Dark Prince. "And no bother about the expression. I've grown used to it."

"Can we send someone to intercept him? A SWAT team? The Warrant Squad?"

"Possibly. I'll continue to track him while Angie and I try to reinforce the chains that bind him." The line ticked silently for a moment. "Mr. McCoy, if I can—"

"If I'm supposed to call you Luci, you're supposed to call me Sam."

"Sam, right. If I can make a suggestion?"

"I'm all ears."

"It might be good to know Brigit Agon's whereabouts."

"Of course," said Sam, smacking his forehead. "I'll send a squad car. In the meantime, I'll activate the on-call SWAT team and have them stand ready."

"Very well, Sam. Call Angie's phone when you're finished, and one of us will update you about our end."

"Right," said Sam and hung up. He immediately placed a call to 1PP and started coffee brewing.

Chapter 4

The Verdict

I

Sam stood alone at the prosecution table as Judge Le Fay made her characteristic entrance and called the session to order. He was the only magister present.

"Light crowd this morning," said Morgana. Her brows furrowed as she glanced at the defense table. "Still nothing?"

"I'm afraid not, Your Honor. His Majesty and Ms. Carmichael continue the fight, but it isn't going well. For our part, we've been unable to send a team to the proper realm in time to put a stop to the running."

Le Fay's face hardened. "I'm not accustomed to being stymied. I'm not sure I like it."

"Me neither, Your Honor."

"Well, what shall we do about it?"

Sam nodded once. "It occurs to me, Judge, that the defendant was present in court for the majority of my case. I had planned to call a jeweler to verify the stone he sold Detectives Oriscoe and Nogan was in fact stolen from the 47th Street Diamond Exchange, but I believe

that has been established by the testimony of the detectives. I'd also have called the ME from the crime scene, but in light of the defendant's flight from justice, that hardly seems necessary."

"You would have me exercise the Covenant of Trial in Absentia?"

Sam nodded. "I would, Your Honor."

Morgana cocked her head to the side. "In a typical case, the defense magister is still around to present her case."

"I believe, Your Honor, that in this case, and since the defense magister is aiding and abetting the defendant's flight, her suitability is in question. Not to mention her qualification before the bar."

"Indeed, Mr. McCoy. Indeed." Le Fay nodded. "Yes. I will appoint a supernatural defender. We will allow the jury to hear the defense's case, then send them out."

"Yes, Your Honor. Thank you."

2

Sam and Angie stood as the jury filed in. Sam had destroyed what little defense the supernatural defender had been able to cobble together, and the jury had been out for only three hours. The jurors met Sam's gaze, and one even smiled, and relief sang through him. His elation increased as Morgana enumerated the charges, and after each one, the jury foreman said, "Guilty."

Morgana smiled. "Very well. The Court thanks you for your service. The jury is dismissed." She waited as they filed out, then turned to Sam. "Do the People object to sentencing at this time?"

"No, Your Honor," said Sam.

"And you, Mr. Laveau?"

"Your Honor, it strikes me that it might be better to wait for the defendant to be recaptured."

"Is that a 'yes,' sir?"

"Um, no, Your Honor."

"Very well. I hereby sentence David Robert Agon, Ph.D., in absentia"—she stared a

moment at Laveau, one eyebrow raised—"in accordance with the Canon and Covenants as the defendant has fled the jurisdiction and is, at present, irretrievable. On the count of robbery, Agon shall serve no less than five, but no more than ten years. For the three counts of aggravated battery on a law enforcement officer, I sentence the defendant to serve no less than ten years for each count. On the count of attempted murder of a law enforcement officer, the defendant shall serve one lifetime. For the two counts of magical murder during the commission of a felony, I sentence the defendant to the maximum sentence allowable by law—to wit, one lifetime for each count. I wish I could do more." She shook her head. "All sentences will be served consecutively in a facility as determined by the Department of Corrections. The matter of the People versus David Robert Agon is concluded." She waved at her gavel and left the bench.

McCoy turned and smiled at Leery. "How's that for justice, Detective?"

Leery glanced at Lucifer, and they shared a secret smile. "That's great, Counselor. A home run."

"Thank you, Detective," said Sam, his gaze bouncing from Leery to Lucifer, then from Lucifer to Dru.

Angie patted him on the back. "Good work, boss," she said.

Chapter 5

The End

I

Sam sat in his office, staring through his window but seeing nothing. The memory of that look between Leery and Lucifer kept replaying in his mind, but why? The two had no doubt grown close during Leery's treatment.

A knock sounded at his door, and he turned. "Come in, Luci," he said.

The Sovereign of Gehenna ducked his head and squeezed through the door. For a moment, Sam wondered why he didn't use the same trick he'd used in the car back in Gehenna, but then supposed the Dark Prince had a larger-than-life reputation to uphold. "Hello, Sam."

"Any news?"

"None, I'm afraid," said the Father of Lies.

"Then they succeeded in peeling away the last of your enchantment?"

Lucifer spread his hands. "So it seems."

Sam looked at him sidelong. "You know, Luci, it strikes me that answer is a little vague."

"Vague? I think it speaks volumes, Sam."

"Not to split hairs with you, but 'so it seems' could literally be interpreted as a simple statement of the facts. It seems like he peeled away the enchantment, but that doesn't necessarily imply that he actually has."

"I'm not sure I take your meaning."

Sam looked at him a moment, then grinned. "I think you do, Luci."

Lucifer returned his grin. "Everyone knows I'm as truthful as they come."

"Truthful? Or honest?"

"Is there a difference?" Luci grinned from ear to ear.

"Care for a drink?"

"Glenlivet?"

"That's the old man's brand. I prefer something a little saucier—Johnny Walker Swing." Sam got up to pour their drinks. When he turned, he held Luci's tumbler out, but he didn't let go of it when the Prince of Power reached to take it. "Would you tell me where he was? If you knew, I mean?"

"That would be the honorable—the *honest*—thing to do, wouldn't it?"

Sam nodded and let go of Satan's tumbler, then saluted him with his own. "I'm not sure that answers the question I asked."

Lucifer smiled. "When one doesn't really want the answer, sometimes it's best not to ask the question at all." He took a sip of his scotch. "Besides, Sam, I'm sure that, wherever he is, the bill for Dr. Agon's sins will be paid in full." For the briefest of moments, Lucifer's eyes glowed as hot as magma, and traces of smoke curled from his ears.

I hope you've enjoyed this episode of CLAW & WARDER and are chomping at the bit to get on to the next. *Sure 'Lock CLAW & WARDER Episode 8* can be found here: https://ehv4.us/4cw8.

If you've enjoyed this novel, please consider joining my Readers Group by visiting https://ehv4.us/join. Or follow me on BookBub by visiting my profile page there: https://ehv4.us/bbub.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Well, hello there, my friend. It's nice to see you again. I'm glad you're still with me on this series, and I hope this latest installment has delighted you. I love the way it turned out—a little darker, perhaps, than some of its siblings—but with some serious ass-kickery from Dru's side of the family. I enjoyed letting them out to play a bit and exploring the side of them that built their reputations, so to speak. I hope you enjoyed it, too.

I had an idea the other day (yeah, *another* one) for yet another series—this time more traditional Urban Fantasy (maybe). I really need you to perfect cloning, my friend. Or maybe a telepathic driver for my keyboard. Or a pause button for time. Or something.

I must admit, that as of this writing, it's difficult for me to keep this pace. When I set up this series, I was miles better, and Petunia was sulking, but that no longer seems to be the case. Sheer fatigue has kept me from getting as much done as I have in the past,

and that's a bit scary, considering all the things I want to write *right now*.

I'm not sure what my publication schedule will look like next year, but I think it'll have to be in smaller chunks—maybe by quarters or something—to give Petunia his due. It's not so bad for these shorter books, but my longer stuff—the horror, the dark fantasy—is suffering from a lack of attention.

And my brain keeps pumping out new ideas, bigger universes... The tempting call of Hank Jensen is always there, too, and I'm finding it harder and harder to resist.

He's me, after all.

If you'd like to chat, please join us in my Facebook Readers' Group at https://ehv4.us/fbog or drop me a line at berserkerik@erikhenryvick.com. I'd love to hear from you.

Until then, my friend, carry on—all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. I hope you are in good cheer, good health, and wealthy!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erik Henry Vick is an author of dark speculative fiction who writes despite a disability caused by his Personal Monster™ (also known as an autoimmune disease.) He writes to hang on to the few remaining shreds of his sanity.

He lives in Western New York with his wife, Supergirl; their son; a Rottweiler named after a god of thunder; and two extremely psychotic cats. He fights his Personal Monster™ daily with humor, pain medicine, and funny T-shirts.

Erik has a B.A. in Psychology, an M.S.C.S., and a Ph.D. in Artificial Intelligence. He has worked as a criminal investigator for a state agency, a college professor, a C.T.O. for an international software company, and a video game developer.

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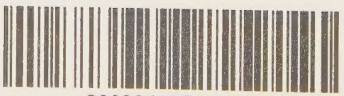

CLAW & WARDER

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

It was the age of Starbucks, it was the age of phone apps. It was the season of the supernatural, it was the season of the mundane. It was the winter of coffee, it was the spring of more coffee...a lot more coffee. It was the epoch of jewelry store robbing reptiles, it was the epoch of early parole.

After eighteen years in a Locus of Baltimore dungeon, Dr. Agon is released to the care of his daughter in the Locus of New York. Following a spate of robberies, Dru and Leery spend the night together...

On a stakeout! (Why? What were you thinking?)

Can they keep their cool or will things get hot in A Tail of Two Cities?

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